

2021

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Recommended Citation

Grygiel, Jakub J. (2021) "The Limits of Sea Power," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 74 : No. 4 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss4/8>

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THE LIMITS OF SEA POWER

Jakub J. Grygiel

The most significant clashes between great powers are occurring on land. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, the rivalry between Iran and the United States and its regional allies, the lengthy conflict in Afghanistan, and the expansion of China's influence along its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) vectors—these are just a few illustrations of the persistent vying for continental political control and influence. For a maritime power such as the United States, these conflicts—with the exception of China's naval actions in the South China Sea—present a peculiar and recurrent challenge, because they take place on continental Eurasia and not on the sea. The United States needs superior naval power and command over maritime access routes to be able to project its will across the oceans. But the other players—from Russia to China and Iran—enjoy internal, continental lines of communication that, while perhaps not as cost-effective as maritime routes, can be shorter and are less vulnerable to seaborne predations. As a result, from the perspective of the United States, sea power is necessary but also has serious limits.

The key question for any maritime power is how to translate its control over the sea into political influence over the land. This conversion of sea power into strategic effects on the continent is neither guaranteed nor easy. Sailing undisturbed on the oceans does not mean that a sea power, such as the United States, has political influence on land; control of the sea does not yield power automatically over the land. This recurrent question and the attendant challenge are not insurmountable,

of course, and throughout history maritime states have pursued strategies to alleviate the limits of sea power and use their maritime superiority to shape political dynamics on land. Blockading their rivals, controlling inland seas, keeping a substantial continental presence, seeking the support of proxy forces and land-based allies, and—on a grand-strategy

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Naval War College Review, Autumn 2021, Vol. 74, No. 4

level—managing rather than defeating the continental rival are some of the approaches that sea powers have adopted to deal with their own limits. But these limits are enduring, requiring continued attention; they never can be overcome fully—they only can be mitigated.

Even raising the possibility that sea powers have inherent weaknesses goes against a Mahan-inspired partiality for the historical superiority of maritime states. Captain (later Admiral) Alfred Thayer Mahan, USN, was the “evangelist of sea power,” writing for a rising maritime power and passionately trying to convince his American audience of the greatness of sea power and the importance of having a navy.¹ He pointed out persuasively that sea-lanes were of greater strategic value than land routes, and thereby highlighted the importance of who controlled them. “Land carriage . . . toils enviously but hopelessly behind, vainly seeking to replace and supplant the royal highway of nature’s own making.”² Several decades before Mahan, John Adams had summed up this great faith in maritime power eloquently. In an 1802 letter, he wrote,

The council which Themistocles gave to Athens—Pompey to Rome—Cromwell to England—DeWitt to Holland—and Colbert to France, I have always given, and shall continue to give to my countrymen—That as the great questions of commerce between nations and empires must be decided by a military marine, and war or peace are determined by sea, all reasonable encouragement should be given to a navy. The trident of Neptune is the sceptre of the world.³

Undoubtedly, control of the sea is a precondition for any far-reaching policy that a power such as the United States may want to pursue; without it, the United States is severed from the rest of the world, turning into an isolated, continental island, not only impotent but vulnerable to the seaborne attacks of adversaries.⁴ Moreover, sea powers have several advantages over land powers. The pressure on their borders tends to be lower than for their continental rivals; in the purest example, islands are more secure than landlocked countries. They have access to, and can control, the maritime arteries of regional and global commerce, making it possible for them to influence the economic welfare of others. They tend to have a more expansive outlook, thinking of distant lands and seeking faraway markets. They have the means to attack a rival state in an unexpected location on its periphery, outflanking it and distracting it from its main vector of expansion. And because of their combination of range with relative security, sea powers tend to enjoy a diplomatic flexibility that a land power, surrounded by enduring enemies, lacks. Mahan, therefore, was not wrong when he argued—and in doing so incited envy among the leaders of land powers such as late-nineteenth-century Germany—that the great powers in history tended to be sea powers. Or, as Paul Kennedy qualified it, writing of the late nineteenth century, “Sea power, as represented by a large surface fleet, commercial activity, naval bases at home and abroad, remained still the best indicator of the

relative national power of all those nations who wished to play on the world stage.⁵ And U.S. history continues to demonstrate the benefits of being a sea power with access to the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and the markets located on their shores.

But sea powers also have many handicaps that often are forgotten, resulting in a dangerous overestimation of their safety, influence, and staying power in a competitive world. From the Athenian Pericles to Germany's Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, many political leaders placed enormous confidence in the ability of maritime command to protect their countries and of naval power to defeat their rivals.⁶ It gave them a false sense of power. A more clear-eyed assessment of power—one less enamored of the grandeur associated with naval might—often revealed that such hope was unwarranted, and that it often ended up having tragic results for the naval aspirant or even the established sea power.

Two weaknesses—or enduring challenges that need to be addressed—have characterized all sea powers in history. First, to be competitive, sea powers have to convert their command of the seas into political effects on land—a feat whose accomplishment is not automatic and requires certain conditions that often are outside the sea power's control. Second, because of their flexibility in alliances and basing, sea powers suffer from a credibility gap that weakens their staying power in faraway lands.

Both of these weaknesses revolve around a core problem: that politics occur on land, where people live, and commanding the seas does not guarantee the desired political outcomes on land.⁷ A purely continental school of strategy—if it emphasizes that the only political, economic, and military dynamics that matter occur on land—is certainly too dismissive of the strategic benefits of sea power.⁸ But a purely maritime-power grand strategy—if it does not consider how to address the fundamental challenge of how to use command of the sea to achieve political outcomes on land and does not deal with the inherent limitations of sea power—is likely to fail. In sum, political outcomes are achieved on land, and sea power, under certain conditions, can be a useful tool.⁹ Julian S. Corbett, the British naval strategist concerned with how to use maritime power to influence political dynamics on the European continent, wrote that “[s]ince men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.”¹⁰

FROM SEA TO LAND

The first weakness—the challenge of converting sea power into political effect—is perhaps the most pervasive, and it becomes particularly evident when a sea

power competes with a continental rival. Translating superiority on the seas into political influence on land is neither automatic nor dependent exclusively on the sea power's skills. In fact, the main determinant of this weakness lies in the nature of the sea power's rival, particularly its exposure to and dependence on the sea. As James E. S. Cable put it, the "elephant is not vulnerable to the crocodile until his trunk dangles near the water's edge."¹¹ The less reliant the rival is on the sea, the less vulnerable it is to a maritime blockade, for example. In such cases, from the sea power's point of view, its command of the seas is less useful and offers less leverage than it might wish.

Historically, the advantage of sea powers stemmed from the cost-effectiveness of maritime navigation and the seaborne transport of goods and forces, as Mahan suggested in the quote given previously. Venice, for example, benefited from an improvement in navigation in the Mediterranean from the eleventh century on, driven by advances in shipbuilding, the enhanced security of key maritime passages, and a growing demand for high-value goods, which combined to give greater weight to sea-lanes over land routes. Hence, the First Crusade at the end of the eleventh century went mostly by land through Constantinople to Jerusalem, while the Third Crusade at the end of the twelfth century proceeded more by sea, as did the notorious Fourth Crusade in the early thirteenth century.¹² Control of the sea, then, bestowed something of enormous value on Venice, or any other power capable of holding it, because it provided leverage over other polities that relied increasingly on maritime commerce and transport.

A similar dynamic favored Great Britain in the nineteenth century, allowing it to turn its maritime dominion into diplomatic supremacy. Like Venice, Great Britain rose to great power

in an era of primitive overland communications. There were few all-weather roads, no motor road vehicles, and only the beginnings of a railway grid. Large-scale movement of people and bulky freight overland, even for relatively short distances, was slow and costly. The advantage of water-borne transport was nearly everywhere decisive. Under these conditions blockade of a country's ports could be a paralyzing experience. Furthermore, it was generally quicker and cheaper in those days to travel around Europe than to cross it. Though the island of Britain lies on the periphery of Europe, the superior mobility of movement by sea rendered the British position strategically central vis-à-vis every continental country, so long as the British Navy controlled the sea.¹³

But the strategic advantage of the seas ebbs and flows in history. Land communications are not perennially inferior and sea-lanes are not inexorably ascendant in strategic value. In some historical periods, a sea power may compete with a rival land power that does not rely heavily on the seas, and therefore is less vulnerable to the sea power. Therefore the ability of a maritime state to wield influence is diminished considerably by factors that are outside its control.

The possibility that sea power would decrease in strategic relevance was envisaged by the two most famous geopolitical thinkers, Sir Halford J. Mackinder and Admiral Mahan. Both argued broadly that the sea powers on the outer edges of Eurasia were outflanking the traditional potentates on the landmass. But access to oceanic routes combined with the maintenance of a large navy constituted a form of power that could be withstood, and perhaps at some point challenged, by a large, well-organized power located in the continental core. The principal threat to maritime dominance therefore was not another power with a large navy (although that, of course, could be a cause of intramaritime rivalry) but a continental center, impenetrable to a sea power's sorties, united by well-functioning land routes, and economically self-sufficient. Another way to describe this nineteenth-century competition is that it was between steamships and railroads, between the efficiency of naval navigation and the speed of land transport. But the general principle has applied throughout history: control of the sea matters in a competition between sea and land powers only when maritime routes are vital to the latter.

The corollary of this principle is that sea powers have a strong interest in preventing the improvement of land routes that could unify a continental power or, more broadly, that would shift commerce away from the sea. But at the same time they have a limited ability to shape this balance of advantages between land and sea routes. They certainly may try to obstruct the development of continental commerce and to compensate with technological innovations in maritime navigation, but the outcome of this balance does not lie exclusively in their own hands. The land power can engage in efforts, such as railroad building in nineteenth-century continental Europe or the development of pipelines and roads across Eurasia in more-recent decades (e.g., China's OBOR efforts), that are to a large degree impervious to the sea power's influence and may result in a considerable diminishment of its grip over the continent.¹⁴

As the continental power's dependence on and vulnerability to the sea decrease, the maritime power has to figure out other ways to exercise pressure on land. As a tool, a naval blockade of an enemy is very selective (targeting a specific power and not others) and low risk (easy to turn on and off); however, it works only if the targeted state relies on the sea.¹⁵ And in any case, while a naval blockade can starve a land power of vital resources, hurting its economy and society, on its own it cannot dislodge the rival from a piece of territory or defeat it comprehensively. The naval power may hope to be able to change the enemy's behavior by merely showing its ships offshore, coercing the rival by the promise of punishment, especially along its coastline.¹⁶ Modern airpower extends the range of naval forces, making targets deep inside the continental mass vulnerable and reinforcing the threat of a seaborne standoff attack. But, like a naval-artillery

barrage, this is an exercise in targeting that may have limited lasting effects on local political dynamics.¹⁷ In the end, there may be a need to inflict a defeat on the continental power, or at least to establish control over a coastal area, and to achieve such an objective airpower and ships floating at a distance do not suffice.¹⁸ The mere control of sea-lanes and the threat of a maritime blockade are insufficient to influence the behavior of a continental rival that has a limited exposure to and reliance on the sea.

To penetrate the rival state's continental shell and have a significant effect on its political and economic dynamics, sea powers historically had three main options: amphibious assaults (resulting in the establishment of a presence) on the enemy's coastal regions, pressure on the rival's land borders, and control over internal seas.¹⁹

Continental Military Presence

The first option is perhaps the most visible, because it involves fleets delivering forces onto shore, followed by sieges of cities and other land battles. Usually, however, such an attack on a coastal fortress or port has been extremely limited in geographic scope, and has not been followed by a massive and lengthy invasion of the rival's territory. Most historical maritime powers, from Venice to Great Britain, focused on ports and other strategic outposts along sea-lanes; they were aware that territorial control required manpower and resources that their states did not have and that were better used on the sea in any case. Instead, the sea power's purpose was to deprive a rival of a safe harbor so it could damage the rival's fleet, reduce its seaborne commerce by attrition, or both. Of course, another gain was a base for its own use. Only rarely, however, could it actually overthrow the hostile polity.²⁰

A limited continental commitment permitted the sea power to maintain a focus on the maritime realm, keeping control of the sea-lanes and accessing distant markets and cities. But the disadvantage was that it had a narrow effect on the hostile land power, and in fact the absence of a long-term presence on the continent exposed the sea power to the rise of land threats that remained unchecked until the only option to deal with them was appeasement.²¹ For instance, with the exception of the Fourth Crusade's targeting the imperial remnants of Byzantium, Venice never fully defeated the rival continental power in question, such as the Ottoman Empire or Hungary. It could thwart a competitor from accessing and controlling a sliver of the sea, or it could inflict a punishing raid on an outpost that was within easy reach of the sea, but it could not overpower its enemy.²² Land-based allies are a way for sea powers to compensate for a limited continental commitment, but the strength of such alliances is tied to the sea power's guarantee to the allies, demonstrated by its durable physical presence. These land-based allies thus are not an alternative to a sea power's continental commitment but an integral part of it.

Continental powers can be defeated only by depriving them of land, conquering their territories piecemeal, and weakening and devastating their armies through battles.²³ As a result, maritime powers, whose efforts focus on the sea and who often are very sensitive to casualties, are more inclined to use diplomacy to conciliate their rivals rather than to embark on a land expedition aimed at territorial conquest and defeat of their enemies. The inherent limitations they have on land lead them toward a grand strategy of managing, rather than defeating, their continental rivals.

Pressure on the Rival's Land Frontier

Creating pressure along the rival's land borders is another option at the disposal of the sea power. The goal is to inflict costs on the continental enemy, most importantly to redirect its attention from the sea to its immediate neighbors along a land frontier.²⁴ Land borders have a powerful diversionary effect because they shape the security of the state's homeland most immediately. Mahan went so far as to suggest "the inability of a state with even a single continental frontier to compete in naval development with one that is insular, although of smaller populations and resources," indicating the enormous vulnerability any state experiences on its land side.²⁵ A sea power, then, can take advantage of this weakness of the enemy by generating pressure on its rival's land frontier. But usually, because of logistical difficulties or a lack of suitable resources, a sea power pursues such a strategy indirectly, through the forces of other states or groups. Such an approach requires diplomacy—that is, some form of bribery or subsidies—that can convince the rival's neighbors to push on the land frontier. Or, in some other cases, the sea power can create conditions for an exacerbated rivalry on land among various powers by inciting conflicts and skillfully shifting its support from one side to the other.

Yet ultimately, the outcome is in the hands of other actors, leaving the sea power at their mercy and requiring a constant and skillful diplomatic effort to keep them either on its side or in conflict with each other. At any point, these powers jockeying for control on land can reach a deal to end their conflict, leaving the sea power without a means to exercise influence on the continent. The geopolitical nightmare for Great Britain, for instance, was the rise of a continental alliance—a "thievish partnership" between France and Russia—that would cut Britain off from Europe and challenge its interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.²⁶ During World War II, the great fear in London and Washington was that Stalin would reach a separate peace with Hitler—another Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—leaving the maritime powers without a way to exert pressure on Germany's eastern land borders.²⁷ Similarly, today the great geopolitical question for the United States is whether Russia will be more aligned with China—establishing a continental entente—rather than maintaining a lengthy land frontier of

friction. In brief, relying on another power to establish lasting sources of continental diversion of a rival is a sometimes necessary but potentially precarious strategy for the sea power.

Control of Internal Seas

The third way for a sea power to influence a land rival's actions is to control the internal seas of and the "brown waters" immediately adjacent to the opponent. These are waters that either are surrounded by land or pierce the continental shell, in the form of bays or channels between coasts and nearby islands. Each bay, inlet, or river can become a "dagger into the interior."²⁸ For the land power, they function as internal routes, linking one region to another through waterways rather than roads, on top of serving as access points to the wider seas. A sea power that establishes naval superiority in such waters can control the movements along the coast and even riverine trade, and by doing so it can impose costs on the rival, translating the power of the navy into economic and political effects on land.

Throughout history, rivers have enabled crucial extensions of sea power, allowing a maritime state to extend influence along the internal arteries of commerce, where a large percentage of the local population also tended to live (e.g., the Congo River for the Belgians, the Red [or Hong] River for the French in Indochina).²⁹ This is a lesson that Mahan drew from history as well as from his personal experience as an officer in the Union navy during the American Civil War. In his first book, *The Gulf and Inland Waters* (1883), he describes how the Union's control of coastal waters from Key West to the outlet of the Rio Grande and its penetration along the Mississippi River hemmed in the Confederate states.³⁰ These Union naval efforts, on top of imposing serious economic costs through a blockade of the South, fractured the enemy's territorial integrity.

But a brown-water strategy also reveals a sea power's weakness, because it is an imperfect substitute for an intervention and presence on land. It works best as a joint operation in conjunction with land forces that sea powers, as mentioned earlier, often are reluctant to use. Such a limited, or supporting, role was assigned to U.S. naval forces in the Mediterranean during the early Cold War, to back the main efforts of allied forces in a land war in Europe and, in the best-case scenario, to open a second front on the southern flank of the USSR to divert some of the Soviet forces away from their westward march.³¹

Moreover, while the naval power can break a continental state's territorial integrity by establishing naval superiority in these brown waters, the land power equally can deny control of these waters to its rival without having to build a matching fleet.³² Often the nature of internal waters, whether bays or larger seas circumscribed by land, is such that they can be controlled through a continental

strategy of dominating key pieces of real estate. The positioning of land forces, and in some cases small littoral fleets, on strategic choke points (such as the Gallipoli Peninsula on the Dardanelles Strait or the deeply embayed Dalmatian coast) can serve to harass, and even deny passage to, the sea power's navy. Such a continental strategy creates bastions along the littoral that constrain the naval movements of a maritime rival. In the most modern iteration of this approach, a land power such as Russia or China can deny access to a maritime power through the development of weapons that from the coast can threaten to inflict unacceptable costs on a hostile naval force (the so-called antiaccess/area-denial approach).³³

An even more ambitious strategy for a land power is to conquer the coast surrounding the sea, challenging the rival state's naval superiority by denying it access to ports and safe harbors. As Napoléon allegedly said in 1806, his goal was "to conquer the sea through the power of land."³⁴ Similarly, the ancient Roman Republic pursued a continental, rather than a thalassocentric, strategy, extending control over the circumference of the Mediterranean Sea.³⁵ The Russian empire also sought to enclose the Black and Baltic Seas from the seventeenth century on.³⁶ This is a form of sea power by coastal control that continental powers can achieve despite the rival's naval superiority. In fact, naval superiority loses its effectiveness in semienclosed seas.³⁷ The competition among great powers as a struggle of navies versus land forces was made more pronounced—while perhaps benefiting the land powers more—by the gunpowder revolution and the advent of coastal artillery from the fifteenth century on.³⁸ Another way to put this is that a land power can exercise control over internal or semienclosed seas without having naval superiority; it can establish *control* of the sea without having *command* of it.

Sea powers' weakness, then, is that they may be unable to translate their superiority on the seas into political effects on land. And if they cannot project influence on land or if they control sea-lanes that are irrelevant to their rivals, then their naval capability is an expensive, capital-intensive resource that is of but limited use in statecraft. It can bring them wealth and even protect them from potentially hostile forces coming from the sea, but beyond this limited defensive role it has little influence over the land powers. Hence, Rome succeeded in preventing an attack on its home territory from Macedonia, an ally of the Carthaginian Hannibal, simply by positioning a naval squadron in the Adriatic near Brindisi, so that "not a soldier of the phalanxes ever set foot in Italy."³⁹ But such a show of force is more useful to prevent an attack than to force the rival to accept more-onerous conditions; it is a tool of prevention and deterrence, not of compulsion. As illustrated by the fifth-century BC war between Athens and Sparta, control of the sea allows the maritime power to survive, but it does not suffice as a means to defeat the land rival.⁴⁰

SEA-POWER FLEXIBILITY AND DIPLOMATIC PERFIDY

Sea powers face a second considerable limitation. Since they are blessed with many strategic options of where to project their force, this flexibility decreases the credibility of their staying power in any given location.⁴¹ This is what the English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon suggested, perhaps inadvertently, when he wrote that “he that commands the sea is at great liberty and may take as much or as little of the war as he will.”⁴² The relative ease of movement that maritime powers have—for instance, to show up in distant places through multiple sea routes—bestows an advantage over a land power that must focus on its immediate neighbors.⁴³ The American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman observed as much when he envisioned the nature of continental expansion as a series of concentric circles, made predictable in their sequencing by the necessary contiguity of territorial control. Maritime powers can hop from point to point, skipping difficult-to-control outposts or changing their market outlets.⁴⁴ Hence, as the American strategic theorist Admiral J. C. Wylie, USN, described it, “the sailor or airman thinks in terms of an entire world, [while] the soldier at work thinks in terms of theaters, in terms of campaigns, or in terms of battles.”⁴⁵

But this tactical luxury of high mobility has diplomatic costs. The possibility of moving away with little effort also can translate into an easy exit for a maritime power. This flexibility can be interpreted as fecklessness. As a result, every time a maritime power establishes a presence on a distant coast or island, it does so under the shadow of doubt regarding the strength of its long-term commitment. And even when a sea power is locked in a relentless competition with a continental rival, its limitations mentioned earlier push it toward a policy of managing the rival—which at times may include appeasing and even aligning with it. The difficulty that sea powers have in defeating a continental power makes them *at least seem* unreliable to other polities that may be in the path of a given land power’s expansionistic impulses. Unreliability can translate into diplomatic perfidy, with the sea power committing to land-based alliances but lacking either the capacity to protect allies fully from their continental rival or the will to devote sufficient resources to defeat the enemy.

The simplest geographic variable—distance—affects not just the ability to deliver power (the effect of the so-called power gradient: the farther the projection of power, the more costly and less effective it is) but also credibility. Venice, for instance, had an easier time convincing its rivals of its commitment to maintaining a monopoly over trade at the nearby outlet of the Po River than it did of its intention to maintain its long-term presence in the Aegean Sea and the eastern Mediterranean islands. Maintaining its *stato da mar* possessions in the Mediterranean required constant efforts and repeated

reconquests. Rebellious indigenous populations (e.g., in Crete) may have calculated—like every guerrilla force in history—that their commitment to their own islands was infinitely firmer than that of the distant Venetians.⁴⁶

The relative weakness of credibility consumes resources because sea powers have to use force constantly to demonstrate their willingness to stay in a distant place. Thus, being a sea power is an expensive proposition, not only because of the costs associated with maintaining a superior naval force, but also because of the unremitting demands to show presence in faraway lands, to maintain custody over vital ports, and to respond to recurrent mutinies in distant outposts.

The protection the seas offer gives the maritime power the leeway to abandon allies without suffering a dramatic loss of security. Whether the allies actually are abandoned is less relevant than the reputation for unreliability that attaches to a sea power. It was just such a reputation that gave England the moniker “Perfidious Albion.” As seventeenth-century French bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet put it in a sermon, “England, perfidious England, which the ramparts of her seas made inaccessible to the Romans.”⁴⁷ The security that the sea provides goes hand in hand with a latent detachment—which others often interpret as perfidy.

The grip of sea powers over the continents is precarious, even when they dominate the oceans. They can endure protracted great-power competitions, win wars, accumulate the most fabulous fortunes, establish footholds in the farthest ends of the earth, and even become objects of jealous emulation for states locked in a continental bastion. But they also have serious limitations that stem from their very nature as masters of the seas, because their maritime strength has limited effects on land. There are, of course, answers to these constraints, ranging from vying for control of inland seas to keeping some presence on the continent, but they only mitigate the limitations, which remain as enduring features of maritime powers. The American historian Theodore Ropp allegedly would walk into his classroom, point to a world map, and announce to his students that “everything blue belongs to us.” The problem, of course, was how to translate such control of the “blue” into a victory that included control over the “brown” and the “green.”⁴⁸

The logical conclusion of this analysis of a sea power’s limits is that two conditions must be present (although not necessarily simultaneously) for a sea power to have an effective strategy and to compete successfully with a land rival. First, the sea power must maintain a continental presence.⁴⁹ The extent and scope of that presence will vary, as they necessarily are linked to the peculiarities of the moment; the effort may require massive physical presence (e.g., American involvement in the European campaign in World War II), aid to

guerrillas (e.g., the British approach in the early-nineteenth-century Peninsular War), or large bases and powerful allies (e.g., the late-twentieth-century U.S. approach). But without such a presence, the translation of maritime power into continental influence is sporadic at best and impossible at worst.

The second condition is that the continental rival must be exposed to the sea and be vulnerable to a threat of disruption of its access to sea-lanes. The assessment of this second condition should shape the sea power's efforts on the first condition; the less vulnerable to the sea the land power is, the greater the necessity for the sea power to have a continental presence. For example, the USSR was not very dependent on maritime commerce, and thus was less susceptible to the threat of a naval blockade. Moreover, its main vectors of expansion were on the Eurasian landmass, with internal lines of communication, and hence its efforts were less vulnerable to Western maritime interdiction. Thus, the United States had to have a large continental presence in Europe to exercise deterrence and influence Soviet behavior. Now, China's economy is more vulnerable to the sea, and an American naval presence demonstrating our command of the seas is our primary effort at affecting its behavior. But if Beijing firms up its control over land routes linking China with the rest of Eurasia, creating a continental core, American naval forces floating in the Pacific Ocean will have considerably less effect on its decisions and behavior.

Eventually, the risk all sea powers face is that they will end up like the French man-of-war positioned off the African coast described by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad. "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent." Nothing happened, of course, because "nothing could happen," even though there must have been a "camp of natives . . . hidden out of sight somewhere."⁵⁰ "Firing into the continent" is an activity that may give the impression of might, but in fact has little impact.

NOTES

1. Margaret Tuttle Sprout, "Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Meade Earle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1943), pp. 415–45.
2. Alfred Thayer Mahan [Capt., USN], *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1917), p. 51.
3. John Adams to Capt. Thomas Truxtun, 30 November 1802, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935–38), vol. 5, p. 175.
4. Sea power is the great enabler, "the midwife to victory." Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 277.
5. Paul Kennedy, "The Sea and Seapower within the International System," in *The Modern World = La période contemporaine*, ed.

- N. A. M. Rodger, unnumbered vol. 4 of *The Sea in History = La mer dans l'histoire*, ed. Christian Buchet (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2021), p. 7.
6. In Pericles's case, his strategy was grounded in the belief that Athens could withstand recurrent Spartan assaults on land by holding to its maritime empire, and victory would come when Sparta realized the futility of its annual incursion in Attica. It was a passive strategy, counting on the self-inflicted costs to Sparta and the willingness and capacity of the Spartan leadership to calculate these costs and stop its offensive against Athens. In brief, it elevated Athenian command of the seas to the principal tool that brought wealth and security to Athens and would defeat Spartan land power without having to engage it directly. It was a strategy of survival but not of victory. Similarly, overly optimistic beliefs in the superior diplomatic power of navies have characterized the policies of many leaders; "policy makers expected greater international advantages from their naval demonstrations, mobilizations, and extra building programmes than they ever received." In fact, even toward weaker states, sea power often has brought few tangible benefits. A case in point was the efforts of several European great powers to influence the decaying Ottoman state through "frequent and sometimes quite useless naval cavortings off her coasts." C. I. Hamilton, "Naval Power and Diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 3, no. 1 (1980), p. 77.
 7. An early critic of an overly strong faith in sea power was Fred Jane, who devoted a whole book to examining the "heresies of sea power." His criticism was centered mostly on the tactical aspects of the principles of naval power (e.g., arguing that the Mahanian principle of concentration of force did not apply in every case of naval history), and more broadly served as a warning against a belief that sea power was the key to victory in war and great-power competition. Fred T. Jane, *Heresies of Seapower* (London: Longman, 1906).
 8. See Roger W. Barnett, "Maritime and Continental Strategies: An Important Question of Emphasis," in *Seapower and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 355, and Michael Evans, *The Continental School of Strategy: The Past, Present and Future of Land Power*, Study Paper 305 (Duntroon, ACT: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2004), available at researchcentre.army.gov.au/.
 9. Paul Kennedy put it succinctly: "[N]othing ever occurred in the maritime realm to equal the devastation of, say, the Thirty Years War on land." Paul Kennedy, "The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power," *International History Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1988), p. 8.
 10. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longman, 1918), p. 12.
 11. James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919–1991*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 37.
 12. John Pryor, "A Medieval Maritime Revolution: Crusading by Sea 1096–1204" (lecture, Univ. of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, March 2010), cited in Richard Unger, "Commerce, Communication, and Empire: Economy, Technology and Cultural Encounters," *Speculum* 90, no. 1 (January 2015), p. 15.
 13. Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, introduction to 1966 edition of *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1939; repr. 1967), p. ix.
 14. The classic statement of this trend is Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998), pp. 196–99.
 15. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974).
 16. Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977). For the uses of navies in peacetime, see John B. Hattendorf, "Recent Thinking on the Theory of Naval Strategy," in *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power*, ed. John B. Hattendorf and Robert S. Jordan (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 149–52. Also see Kevin Rowlands [Cdr., RN], "Decided Preponderance at Sea: Naval Diplomacy in Strategic Thought," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 89–105.
 17. On the limitations of airpower, see Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), and Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing*

- of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2006).
18. In fact, both Edward Luttwak and Gerald Graham argue that an a priori recognition of naval and, above all, national primacy is a necessary condition for the symbolic use of naval power to have a political effect. The show of naval force is linked not just to the particular capabilities, which may be impressive, but to the resolve, strength, and reputation of the nation wielding it. Hence, what matters is less the actual capability of a particular vessel appearing off the coast of the rival but what flag it flies. Some sea powers can constrain the action of others through a “shadow” (Luttwak’s word) rather than through a constant physical presence. See Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power*, and Gerald S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy: Studies in British Maritime Ascendancy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965; repr. 2008).
 19. See also Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, pp. 31–55.
 20. For the necessity for, yet the difficulty of, conducting land operations to secure a naval base, see Charles E. Callwell, *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance: Their Relations and Interdependence* (London: William Blackwood, 1905), pp. 110–25.
 21. The British Empire also faced this challenge, as it may have spread its resources too thin across its vast imperial frontier while limiting its commitment to the European continent. As a result, in the early twentieth century it left its most immediate threat, Germany, unchecked until it was too late to deter it effectively. See Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972), and G. C. Peden, “The Burden of Imperial Defence and the Continental Commitment Reconsidered,” *Historical Journal* 27, no. 2 (June 1984), pp. 405–23.
 22. Hamilton, “Naval Power and Diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century,” p. 80.
 23. An analogous challenge presents itself when a sea power faces a naval rival: often winning a naval battle is not sufficient to achieve dominance over the sea, and certainly not to defeat the rival comprehensively. The Venetian and Spanish victory at Lepanto in 1571 over the Ottoman navy was a historic achievement, but it did not eliminate the Turkish presence in the eastern Mediterranean; it did even less to arrest the Turks’ expansion in Europe (which finally was checked a century later at the Siege of Vienna). As the grand vizier Mehmed Sokollu put it to a Venetian diplomat, “by taking Cyprus we have cut off your arm; by defeating our fleet, you have merely shaved our beard. An arm, once severed, never grows back, but the beard, after it is shaved, comes back stronger than before.” Alvise Zorzi, *La repubblica del leone* (Milan, It.: Bompiani, 2001), p. 358. See also Andrew Hess, “The Battle of Lepanto and Its Place in Mediterranean History,” *Past & Present*, no. 57 (November 1972), pp. 53–73, and William McNeill, *Venice: The Hinge of Europe* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 123–54.
 24. The opposite—namely, using naval power to redirect the attention of a land rival away from its continental efforts—rarely works. The British, for example, tried to divert French forces from the Spanish Netherlands in the 1690s by bombarding French ports (Calais, Saint-Malo, Dunkirk) and by amphibious attacks (Saint-Malo, Brest) but had no success. See Jeremy Black and Cheryl Fury, “The Development of Sea Power, 1649–1815,” in *The Social History of English Seamen, 1650–1815*, ed. Cheryl Fury (Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p. 6.
 25. Cited in Jon T. Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), p. 81.
 26. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy*, p. 72.
 27. Vojtech Mastny, “Stalin and the Prospects of a Separate Peace in World War II,” *American Historical Review* 77, no. 5 (December 1972), pp. 1365–88.
 28. Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021), p. 26.
 29. Kevin Rowlands, “Riverine Warfare,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018), pp. 53–69.

30. Alfred Thayer Mahan [Cdr., USN], *The Gulf and Inland Waters*, vol. 3 of *The Navy in the Civil War* (New York: Scribner's, 1883).
31. Jakub J. Grygiel, "The Dilemmas of US Maritime Supremacy in the Early Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 202–204.
32. Theodore Ropp, "Continental Doctrines of Sea Power," in Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 446–56; Callwell, *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance*, p. 126.
33. On the maritime strategies of land powers, see also Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, pp. 56–90.
34. "Je veux conquérir la mer par la puissance de terre." Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution française* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1904), vol. 7, p. 115.
35. J. H. Thiel, *Studies on the History of Roman Sea-Power in Republican Times* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1946). Clark Reynolds writes that the success of the Romans, "a non-maritime people capable of commanding the seas for nearly a millennium, must stand as a testimony of what a continental nation can do upon the seas, given simultaneously favorable historical variables of geography, organization, and disunited competitors." Clark Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), p. 77.
36. Colin Gray, "History for Strategists: British Seapower as a Relevant Past," in *Seapower: Theory and Practice*, ed. Geoffrey Till (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1994), p. 17.
37. The British Empire, for example, had a hard time helping its ally Sweden in 1808–1809 when the latter was under Russian attack, because, in part, it could not control the Baltic Sea. The flip side of this situation was when a weak power such as the declining Austro-Hungarian Empire could control the Adriatic Sea throughout World War I, until the armistice, despite being thoroughly defeated on land—exactly because a small, semiencloded sea diminishes the advantages that a powerful maritime state has in more-open seas. See James Davey, *The Transformation of British Naval Strategy: Seapower and Supply in Northern Europe, 1808–1812* (Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell, 2012), pp. 125–26, and Lawrence Sondhaus, "Austria-Hungary: An Inland Empire Looks to the Sea," in Rodger, *The Modern World*, pp. 180–90.
38. One immediate consequence of this was that powers in these semiencloded seas ended up developing ships that were more defensible, capable of withstanding fast attacks from coastal artillery and from speedy boats hidden in bays. Theodore Ropp observed that the Mediterranean was "more suited to the lightning clashes of special task forces than to the methodical maneuvers of entire fleets." Consequently, regional powers such as Italy and France in the early twentieth century developed "shore based aircraft, heavily gunned cruisers, and heavy battleships. The carrier and the big flying boat were both unnecessary and the capital ship for such conditions needed to be as nearly unsinkable as possible." The absence of long-distance maneuvers meant short, sharp, and close-quarter fights, requiring a different technological solution. Ropp, "Continental Doctrines of Sea Power," p. 455.
39. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1898), p. 16.
40. This weakness of the sea power facing a land power also was evident during the Napoleonic Wars. Napoléon had to be defeated on land, by armies, and while the naval might of Great Britain could prevent a French expansion outside continental Europe, it could not arrest the movement of the Napoleonic forces on land. The role of the navy therefore was merely defensive, and the British Empire needed an army, preferably small, for offensive purposes, such as the defeat of a land rival. As a historian puts it, "despite the famous dictum of Admiral Mahan, it was not 'those far-distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked' that defeated Napoleon, simply because the Grand Army never looked upon them." J. F. Lazenby, "Naval Warfare in the Ancient World: Myths and Realities," *International History Review* 9, no. 3 (August 1987), p. 441. Also see Robert Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 626.
41. This limitation is related, of course, to the features that characterize a navy. Ken Booth lists the following seven: versatility, controllability, mobility, projection ability, access

- potential, symbolism, and endurance. The last one, endurance, may appear to contradict the point I make here—namely, that sea powers have a credibility problem owing to their great flexibility. But Booth refers to the ability of a few ships to stay put in a particular location for weeks and months, not to the enduring ties that a maritime power may develop to a distant location. Navies, by their very nature, can move away with great ease, even if they have the endurance to stay at sea. Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, pp. 33–35.
42. In his elegy on sea power, Bacon added that the “vantage of strength at sea (which is one of the principal dowries of this kingdom of Great Britain) is great . . . because most of the kingdoms of Europe are not merely inland, but girt with the sea most part of their compass.” Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842), vol. 1, p. 39.
 43. An ancillary consequence is that sea powers often generate a mentality of insouciance regarding or disinterest in the affairs of the land. Joseph Conrad described it best: “In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing.” Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*, in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1924), p. 48.
 44. “A sea power conquers a large space by leaping lightly from point to point, adjusting itself to existing political relationships wherever possible, and often not establishing its legal control until its factual domination has long been tacitly recognized. An expanding land power moves slowly and methodically forward, forced by the nature of its terrain to establish its control step by step and so preserve the mobility of its forces. Thus, a land power thinks in terms of continuous surfaces surrounding a central point of control, while a sea power thinks in terms of points and connecting lines dominating an immense territory.” Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy, II,” *American Political Science Review* 32, no. 2 (April 1938), p. 224.
 45. Joseph C. Wylie Jr. [Rear Adm., USN], *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1967; repr. 1980), p. 49.
 46. For the classic history of Venice and its constant trade-offs between the Italian mainland and its Mediterranean possessions, see Frederic Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973). On Venice’s *stato da mar*, see David Jacoby, “La Venezia d’Oltremare,” in *Storia di Venezia*, vol. 2, *Letà del Comune*, ed. Giorgio Cracco and Gherardo Ortalli (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1995), pp. 263–99.
 47. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Oeuvres complètes de Bossuet* (Besançon, Fr.: Outhenin-Chalandre Fils, 1840–41), vol. 5, p. 264.
 48. See James Stokesbury, review of *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires*, by Clark Reynolds, *Naval War College Review* 38, no. 2 (March–April 1985), p. 118.
 49. On the necessity of a “joint” approach to sea and land power, see also Carnes Lord, “The Leverage of Sea Power,” *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 2 (2021), pp. 194–97.
 50. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 62.