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Dustin J. Nicholson USMC

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HOW THE WEAK CAN BEAT THE STRONG IN WAR AT SEA

Dustin J. Nicholson

Throughout history, weaker naval powers have sought to overcome their relative weakness to contest command of the sea. This inclination represents a clear continuity in naval warfare that remains ever present today.

CONTESTING COMMAND OF THE SEA

Weaker naval powers can contest command of the sea either through alliances with third-party naval powers or through asymmetric naval strategies. In the first case, weaker powers form alliances with third parties to mount a combined capability to contest command of the sea; in the second, weaker naval powers employ asymmetric strategies that leverage fortress fleets and commerce raiding to their advantage.

Rent a Navy

History shows that weaker naval powers can contest command of the sea by forming alliances with other sea powers. This “rent a navy” strategy enabled

Major Dustin J. Nicholson, USMC, graduated with highest distinction from the College of Naval Command and Staff in June 2022. Upon graduation from the Maritime Advanced Warfighting School in September 2022, he will serve as a plans officer in III Marine Expeditionary Force, Okinawa, Japan. The paper on which this article is based won the John J. D’Luhry Prize honoring excellence in strategic analysis and thought.

Sparta, a classic land power, to go to sea in the Peloponnesian War and defeat Athens, the dominant sea power of the day. In the American Revolution, American insurgents pursued a similar strategy under which Franco-American forces on land, buttressed by a French fleet at sea, surrounded and defeated British forces on the coast, even though Britannia ruled the waves in that era. Lastly, Japan pursued this strategy with a twist in

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the Russo-Japanese War when it formed an alliance with Britain to “rent” sufficient naval deterrence to keep Japan’s war with Russia geopolitically isolated.

Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian War, which spanned nearly three decades, reached a decisive outcome only when Sparta acquired a fleet through its long-sought alliance with Persia.

From the start of the war, the “elephant” knew that it would have to put to sea to beat the “whale.” Archidamus, one of Sparta’s kings at the war’s opening, recognized in his prewar net assessment that Sparta needed to ally with a whale; “Hellenic or barbarian it matters not.”¹ While Sparta made initial attempts to beat Athens on land, “it was only when Sparta embraced sea power that it defeated Athens—not in the fields of Attica, but on the seas from which Athens derived its power.”² Once Sparta had access to a Persian fleet to take its hoplites to sea, it could project its power across the Aegean to seize territory in the Hellespont, the narrow straits through which Athens imported grain from distant markets.³

Sparta’s strategy threatened the commercial access on which Athens relied—a move that would have resonated with Alfred Thayer Mahan—thereby forcing Athens to give battle in faraway waters. And this is where fighting with a rented navy offers its greatest advantage; a loss at sea would amount to a setback for Sparta but would spell defeat for Athens.⁴ The elephant won because it grew disposable fins before the whale could grow disposable legs.

The United States in the Revolutionary War. Some twenty-two centuries later, a new nation would win its independence from the world’s reigning maritime hegemon by allying with a third party that could compete for command of the sea. Much as Sparta eagerly allied with a “barbarian” sea power, the nascent American republic warmly embraced the naval might of a French despot.

General George Washington wrote a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette in November 1781 in which he echoed what Archidamus long before had told his Spartan audience: “No land force can act decisively unless accompanied by a maritime superiority.”⁵ By securing an alliance with Britain’s leading naval rival, the Americans transformed London’s domestic affair into a global contest. “By its presence alone,” France’s navy “had reduced British counterinsurgency to a secondary priority.”⁶

Strategically unhinged, the Royal Navy now sought to defend all the British Empire’s interests with inferior forces at every location—creating opportunities for Franco-American exploitation, and later providing Mahan the impetus for much of his naval theory.⁷ Although the United States was the far weaker naval power, it leveraged third-party alliances to leave Britain “more isolated than at any other time in its history, even more than in 1940.”⁸

Japan in the Russo-Japanese War. More than a century later, Japan deftly leveraged its alliance with Britain to keep Russia’s fleet isolated, both diplomatically

and logistically. The Russo-Japanese War illustrated how a weaker naval power, in this case Japan, could overcome its relative weakness by shaping the strategic and operational environment in its favor. Rather than renting Britain's Royal Navy to fight tsarist Russia, Japan instead sought to "rent" the Royal Navy's deterrent effect to keep France (Russia's ally) out of the war.

Absent aid from France and the use of the numerous ports that country could have made available along the route to the Far East, Russia's Baltic Fleet sailed more than eighteen thousand miles in isolation. Japan's strategy combined distance with diplomacy to erode Russia's prewar naval superiority, to the point that the Baltic Fleet's admiral messaged home: "I have not the slightest prospect of recovering command of the sea."⁹

Although separated by thousands of years and thousands of miles, Aegospotami, Yorktown, and Tsushima all intersect in an important way. Each was the final naval battle of a war wherein the weaker sea power leveraged its naval allies to win.

Impose Asymmetric Costs

Absent the intervention of third-party navies, weaker naval powers still can seek to contest command of the sea directly through asymmetric strategies that leverage fortress fleets and commerce raiding. For these strategies to work, the costs imposed on the stronger adversary must be higher than those incurred by the weaker naval power.

World War I illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of fortress fleets, while World War II demonstrated the extreme costs that a weaker naval power could impose through asymmetric commerce raiding. Lastly, case studies from the post-World War II era prove that these strategies remain a fixture of naval warfare.

Germany in World War I. When facing a superior naval opponent during World War I, Germany and the Ottoman Empire each employed fortress-fleet strategies. They experienced divergent operational outcomes.

Frequently asserted to constitute the beginning of a classic Thucydides trap, the unification of the German states in 1871 "brought about a structural change" in Europe that placed Germany on a collision course with Britain.¹⁰ Although Kaiser Wilhelm II endeavored to come out ahead in a prewar naval arms race, war intervened in 1914 with Germany's High Seas Fleet still weaker by any measure compared with Britain's Grand Fleet. Therefore, Germany pursued a fortress-fleet strategy as propounded by the French *Jeune École*, which emphasized the cost-imposition advantages that emerging technologies afforded to weaker naval powers—namely, small mines and little torpedo boats now could sink big battleships.¹¹ With the High Seas Fleet as a fortified fleet in being, German strategy

aligned with the adage attributed to Britain's most famous admiral: "A ship's a fool to fight a fort."¹²

The logic of this strategy, however, required the Royal Navy to be "foolish enough to rush into the Heligoland Bight."¹³ Yet with the stalemate in the North Sea playing to Britain's favor, the Grand Fleet had no need to rush in, and this in turn eventually forced Germany's High Seas Fleet to sally forth to Jutland.

Turkey in World War I. The key difference with the Ottoman Empire's employment of a fortress-fleet strategy in the Dardanelles campaign of 1915 was that the British did *not* have time on their side; in short, rushing in was thought the least-foolish option. And in reality, had an ill-fated series of mine explosions not occurred, the outcome for Britain might have proved very different.¹⁴

Yet history records how the Ottomans successfully wielded a force that was far more fortress than fleet to impose greater naval costs on their mightier adversary, pushing the Allied powers back out to sea after suffering a quarter-million casualties. The Turkish fortress fleet had been underestimated beforehand, and subsequently it denied the world's most capable naval power access to the straits.¹⁵

Germany in World War II. The Second World War surpassed in destructiveness the First World War by most measures, and this held true for the destructive capacities of weaker naval powers as they implemented asymmetric strategies to contest command of the sea. Nazi Germany waged a commerce-raiding campaign in the Battle of the Atlantic that nearly succeeded in preventing Allied industrial power from being projected onto the European continent.¹⁶

Although Germany was the "weaker" naval power, its level of effort was staggering, from several perspectives. In terms of time, "the Battle of the Atlantic lasted from 3 September 1939 through the end of the war in Europe."¹⁷ In terms of scale, "the Allies lost three million tons of shipping in American waters" in just the first six months of 1942 alone.¹⁸ Having "woefully underestimated the U-boat menace" during the interwar period, the Anglo-American navies entered another world war lacking adequate countermeasures to unrestricted submarine warfare.¹⁹ Only significant wartime adaptation got the Allied navies back on the winning side of a grim cost-imposition contest.

Other Case Studies. From the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War to America's ongoing strategic rivalry with the People's Republic of China, weaker naval powers of the post-World War II era have continued to embrace asymmetric strategies to contest command of the sea. In October 1950, North Korean mines in Wonsan harbor delayed the U.S. X Corps's amphibious assault long enough "that even Bob Hope's USO show had beaten them to Wonsan, much to MacArthur's embarrassment and chagrin."²⁰ As a prelude to the opening of America's next war, North Vietnamese patrol craft launched torpedoes at an American

destroyer in the Tonkin Gulf on 2 August 1965. A second attack was thought to have occurred two days later, leading Congress to pass, “with near-unanimity, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.”²¹ In the next major war the United States fought, Iraq’s coastal defenses posed enough of an asymmetric threat to make gaining approval for Operation TIGER—the proposed amphibious assault from the waters of the Persian Gulf—“an all-but-impossible task.”²²

Although each of these post–World War II case studies offers a glimpse of a weaker naval power’s attempt to contest America’s command of the sea, those efforts pale in comparison with the unprecedented fortress fleet that China is building today within its ever-expanding antiaccess/area-denial zone. China’s rapid naval expansion and maturing precision-strike regime have renewed vigorous interest in the very question this article aims to answer.

COUNTERARGUMENT: GEOGRAPHY TENDS TO PREVAIL

Some may argue that asymmetric naval strategies are inherently futile, since the side employing them seldom wins the war. In short, the only consistent way for a weaker naval power to overcome its relative weakness *and win* is by allying with a third-party sea power. Such critics would be correct to point out that each of the weaker naval powers mentioned in the first section of this article—that is, those that allied with other sea powers—were victorious. Conversely, all the weaker sea powers in the second section of this article—those that built coastal defenses or fortress fleets or depended principally on *guerre de course*—were vanquished.²³ One might conclude that the distinction lies in the reality that the weaker naval power in any given war is most likely at a geographic disadvantage. In other words, the only way for a weaker naval power to overcome its deficit in the geographic elements of sea power is to ally with a third power that maintains a relative surplus in such elements.

Although Themistocles was able to set ancient Athens onto a trajectory toward maritime hegemony by building walls that “fastened [his] city to the Piraeus and the land to the sea,” this degree of geographic conversion remains historically anomalous.²⁴ Germany discovered—and then rediscovered—through each world war just how difficult it is to convert inherent land power into unnatural sea power. Simply put, Germany wasted much of its finite resources in attempting to overcome the limitations of its geography. “Germany suffered a severe handicap” in geographic terms, as “all its sea-borne commerce had to pass through either the North Sea or the English Channel, almost literally under the guns of the British navy.”²⁵ In fact, few even in Britain realized “how great a role geography played in the checking of the German challenge.”²⁶ Sharing land borders with powerful and hostile neighbors on the continent only made it more “improbable, as Mahan pointed out,” for Germany to “ever divert from its army enough of its human and

material resources to win primacy at sea.”²⁷ In stark contrast, Britain maintained a clear sea-power advantage—one that was elemental—in times of peace and war through the natural insularity its geographic disposition provided.

Those who emphasize the geographic elements of sea power above the asymmetric tendencies of weaker naval powers likely would draw many parallels between the Anglo-German imbalance of the early twentieth century and the Sino-American imbalance taking shape today. “Before you decide for war, look at geography”—sound advice in any situation, and it ought to ring loudly in Chinese ears.²⁸ A chain of island nation-states, all of which are either allies or defense partners of the United States, encloses China’s coastline, from end to end.²⁹ Provided that the United States can maintain access to and basing rights on the first island chain, when China looks seaward it will continue to see the equivalent of thousands of unsinkable aircraft carriers that could impose high costs on its new navy. Until China achieves its aim of “breaking the island chain so it can prosper,” it remains more a contested near-sea power than an uncontested oceanic power.³⁰

More to the point, whereas Britain could leverage its insularity as a small island power over Germany to great effect, the United States can do so on a continental scale. It is arguably America’s greatest geostrategic advantage that it remains the world’s only great power not found within the densely packed Eurasian mass. Much as Wilhelmine Germany had to contend with maritime geography that handicapped its otherwise grand maritime aspirations, so too must Xi’s China.

REBUTTAL: A LOT CAN HAPPEN IN ONE AFTERNOON

Consideration of the geographic elements of sea power, viewed from America’s perspective, can be encouraging, given that the United States of today meets Mahan’s criteria on a scale that even he could not have anticipated fully in 1890. Yet if geography were a panacea, war would be predictable and strategy would be irrelevant. When imagining a high-end war between China and the United States, one ugly truth comes to light as a succinct rebuttal to the counterargument: only an *American* admiral could lose that war in an afternoon.

Just as Britain’s decades of sea-power advantages over Germany came with an added burden for the Royal Navy in the First World War, so too will America’s navy carry such a burden in any future contest for command of the sea, especially one with China. And, just as Britain had to adapt its maritime strategy toward Germany by shifting from a close blockade to a distant blockade, so too must the United States pursue a naval strategy that manages risk through appropriate standoff.³¹ To be clear: Modern asymmetric naval technologies have not erased the effects of geography; if anything, geography holds an even more prominent position in maritime strategy today. As fortress fleets evolved from dominating harbors to dominating territorial waters to dominating near-sea expanses,

weaker naval powers continued to blend the land with the sea to overcome their relative weakness. In response, the stronger naval power must stand ready to win a contest for command of the sea through an equally blended strategy.

Therefore, geography must be at the center of American naval strategy. The first island chain holds Sino-American attention, and for good reason. As Sir Julian Corbett professed to his seagoing countrymen more than a century ago, wars are “settled on dry land.”³² Any future Sino-American contest for command of the sea will be settled on dry land by troops with wet boots. When Sparta and Athens clashed as two titans long ago, it was the littoral bits of land throughout the ancient Greek world that bore the brunt of the fighting.³³ From that viewpoint, there is perhaps much that remains unchanged.

NOTES

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2. John Nash, “Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018), p. 126.
3. Pavkovic, “The Ionian War.”
4. Nash, “Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War,” p. 121.
5. John H. Maurer, “Sea Power: Alfred Thayer Mahan” (Naval War College lecture, Newport, RI, 1 December 2021).
6. James Pritchard, “French Strategy and the American Revolution: A Reappraisal,” *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 4 (Autumn 1994), p. 93.
7. A. T. Mahan [Capt., USN], *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890), p. 535.
8. Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2013), p. 13.
9. Richard Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: Russia’s War with Japan*, rev. ed. (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 314.
10. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 516. See also Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).
11. Kevin D. McCranie, “The War at Sea” (Naval War College lecture, Newport, RI, 15 December 2021).
12. James R. Holmes, “U.S. Maritime Strategy toward China” (Naval War College lecture, Newport, RI, 11 February 2022). See also Wayne P. Hughes Jr. and Robert P. Girrier, *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations*, 3rd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).
13. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Ashfield, 1987), p. 243.
14. McCranie, “The War at Sea.”
15. Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2004); Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014).
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17. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), p. 235.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

19. Ibid., p. 236.
20. Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (Boston: W. W. Norton, 2013), p. 117.
21. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 95.
22. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 175.
23. The Korean War stalemated and the Vietnam War certainly was not a U.S. victory. Those important points aside, the focus here is on the contest for command of the sea, in which the United States remained unrivaled.
24. Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. 2, *Themistocles and Camillus. Aristides and Cato Major. Cimon and Lucullus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 47 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914), 19.2–3, quoted in Nash, “Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War,” p. 123.
25. Margaret Tuttle Sprout, “Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1948), p. 425.
26. Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, p. 242.
27. Sprout, “Mahan,” p. 425.
28. Sally C. M. Paine, “War Termination” (Naval War College lecture, Newport, RI, 8 December 2021).
29. Holmes, “U.S. Maritime Strategy toward China.”
30. Ibid.
31. Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, p. xxxv.
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33. Nash, “Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War,” p. 133.