

Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought

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Soviet admiral Sergey G. Gorshkov and Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap might have been worthy of inclusion.

Because Bonadonna seeks to cover so much so quickly, he shortchanges important topics and concepts; he introduces them, but then leaves them by the wayside. These include Daniel Kahneman's work on slow and fast thinking and the techniques that Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May recommend to aid decision makers.

In several places in the book, Bonadonna brushes against potential intellectual and professional firestorms, but he simply sidesteps them. One of the most problematic is the exclusionary nature of the very term *officer*. In 1957, Samuel Huntington published *The Soldier and the State*. In his work, Huntington clearly and deliberately excluded enlisted personnel, including senior noncommissioned officers, from membership in the profession of arms. Bonadonna acknowledges that this distinction is out of favor today, yet he continues to focus on officers, tacitly reinforcing Huntington's distinction. Officers evidently think one way; enlisted personnel, including the most senior E-9s, apparently think another.

It should be no surprise to learn that the young women and men who were Dr. Bonadonna's students at USMMA revere and admire him. If his pedagogic teaching style was similar to his writing, he likely had those young minds on the edge of their mental seats. However, when it comes to andragogy, more-senior and -seasoned readers easily may regard his assurance as arrogance and his no doubt well-meaning efforts to communicate as condescension.

It is telling, given Bonadonna's thesis, that no serving or retired officer

penned an endorsement for the book's cover; it would be interesting to know whether any were invited to do so.

RICHARD NORTON



Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought, by Kevin D. McCranie. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021. 344 pages. \$42.95.

For more than a hundred years, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett have stood at the pinnacle of modern naval strategy. Even today, Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890) and Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911), each considered to be the masterwork of its author, often are required reading for young, developing naval officers. Unfortunately, many modern readers tend to limit their study to those apparent masterworks, or even just the most popular passages thereof. In doing so, readers miss much of the nuance and steady development that both Mahan and Corbett presented through a plethora of other books and articles. The result is a limited and flawed understanding of the material, which in turn has contributed to a mistaken depiction of the two theorists as having founded contradictory schools of thought. According to Kevin McCranie, professor and former head of the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College, Mahan and Corbett align and agree too much for their ideas to be considered in competition (p. 251). In his introduction, McCranie declares that there is no substitute for reading the works of Mahan and Corbett themselves; however, reading enough of the work

of either theorist to gain a credible familiarity would take significant time. Helpfully, McCranie advances the cause by identifying the strategic concepts and underlying principles of Mahan and Corbett within the context of the whole of their written works and presenting them side by side. Despite the difficulty in providing a concise analysis of two prolific writers in a single volume, McCranie—true to his book’s title—provides a solid foundation from which students of strategy and laypeople alike can begin the study of two still-relevant theorists. Individual chapters describe Mahan’s and Corbett’s takes on grand strategy, command of the sea, sea denial, joint expeditionary warfare, concentration of force, the role of commerce in warfare, civil-military relations, and other major concepts they explored in their works. The book concludes with individual chapters summarizing remarkably similar Mahanian and Corbettian ways of war, giving the reader the background needed to make a thorough and nuanced comparison between the two theorists.

Mahan and Corbett frequently agreed on the various components of sea power but applied them under different circumstances; they wrote for two nations with navies in vastly different states of development and effectiveness. The U.S. Navy of 1890 boasted far from the latest in warship design or weaponry, and there was little public desire to employ it for much more than coastal defense. Emphasizing the connection between a strong navy and economic prosperity, Mahan sought to convince the United States to build a modern navy capable of projecting power on the world stage. By contrast, Corbett was writing for the dominant naval power of the day; Great Britain and its people did not need to be

sold on the benefits of a strong navy. He went on to emphasize that a navy was but one instrument of national power, and that it needed to be used in combination with land forces, economic pressure, and diplomacy. In simplest terms, Mahan advocated for a U.S. Navy that was capable of achieving a decisive victory like that at Trafalgar in 1805, while Corbett sought to remind Great Britain that such a victory by itself had not been sufficient to end the Napoleonic Wars.

Both theorists were teachers to their nations’ naval officers, and both used historical examples to illustrate their theories. Especially in his early books, Mahan had a tendency to overlook historical minutiae and the “plurality of causes” of events, instead concentrating on larger-scale trends and events, which resulted in a deliberately selective interpretation to support his conclusions better (p. 45). Corbett wrote multiple historical works before delving into naval strategy. His introduction to Great Britain’s Navy Records Society by John Knox Laughton facilitated the deep dives into archival records that became the bedrock of Corbett’s subsequent writing. As the First World War loomed, both authors initially were more comfortable working on history than speculating on future events. Despite their different methodologies, Mahan and Corbett eventually arrived at many of the same strategic concepts, and much of the apparent divergence in their works makes sense given the different nations for which they wrote.

Mahan and Corbett both wrote toward the end of a long interval between large-scale wars and at a time when rapid technological developments were about to change the face of naval warfare. We stand at a similar point today, with nearly eighty years having passed

since the end of World War II and a host of new technologies waiting to be proved in combat. The particular means of applying sea power have changed dramatically since the dawn of the twentieth century, but the underlying principles that Mahan and Corbett put forward remain sound. Examining and understanding how these theorists approached the naval problems of their day still can offer valid lessons to the modern reader. *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* provides an excellent accompaniment to such an effort.

MICHAEL ROMERO



The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China, by Kevin Rudd. New York: PublicAffairs, 2022. 420 pages. \$32.

Books by high-level former government officials can provide insights into strategic thinking and insider tidbits on policy decision-making. This book delivers that. Although the author is a former Australian prime minister and foreign minister, here Rudd focuses his attention on U.S.–People's Republic of China relations, providing his exceptionally experienced and keen perspective on these two powerful states and their leaders. It is a volume that anyone interested in understanding U.S.–China relations will want to read.

One of the most challenging aspects of writing on contemporary China, however, is that by the time any book on the subject is published much of it is already out of date. Rudd's volume indeed is subject to this challenge, given that much of the statistical and anecdotal

substance soon will seem dated to future readers. The book, published in March 2022, also does not address the Russian invasion of Ukraine just a month earlier, although that event is an essential factor in assessing modern China's foreign policy and future international relations. Yet the book contributes to our understanding by putting current data and trends into historical context, ably knitting together near- and long-term dynamics to explain China's current and potential future trajectories. Rudd is able to assess Sino-Russian relations clearly, concluding that "Xi and Putin have transformed what had been a bitter rivalry into a de facto political, economic, and strategic alliance—withstanding frequent official protestations to the contrary" (p. 182). He thereby anticipates aptly what the world has observed in the Xi-Putin relationship since Russia's invasion and the support thereof by the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as explaining why Beijing sees Putin's more-aggressive actions as a strategic asset for China's own ambitions.

As an experienced scholar and politician, Rudd avoids the mistake of making bold declarations about China's future, yet he also is clear about the challenges he believes China faces under the leadership of Xi, of whom he is quite critical. Fluent in Mandarin and having met Xi in person, Rudd adds rare and valuable insights on Xi the man, politician, and leader, helping to bring into focus the still-murky picture of the person at the head of the world's second-most-powerful state.

Rudd's book makes it easy to understand an impressively wide range of critical issues driving China's current decision-making, explaining these from Beijing's perspective, as well as