

STRATEGIC SNAPSHOTS

SNAPSHOT 2

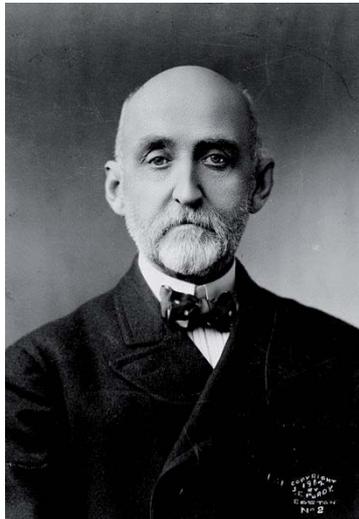
America's Grand Strategy in Asia: What Would Mahan Do?

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One hundred and ten years ago America's first internationally recognised geo-strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, published a monograph very similar to the Lowy Institute's report *Power and Choice*.¹ In *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect upon International Policies*,² Mahan predicted that Asia's changing power dynamics would increasingly determine the larger global order and American security. He anticipated the relative decline of British power in the Pacific; a growing struggle among Japan and the other European powers for pre-eminence; and eventually the emergence of a powerful China and India. He cautioned that even after victory over Spain in 1898, America was still at best a peer power in the region. Without an effective grand strategy towards Asia, he warned, the United States' ability to maintain a stable strategic equilibrium and continued access to China through the new doctrine of the Open Door would be in jeopardy.

Mahan's vision of grand strategy towards Asia integrated all the tools of national power. First, he advocated a bigger navy and more bases in the Western Pacific (Mahan was influential in decisions between 1898 and 1908 to double the size of the Navy and secure bases in Hawaii, Midway, the Philippines and Samoa). Second, he recognised that US naval power alone would not be enough to maintain a stable strategic equilibrium, so he pushed with some success for a US policy aimed at seeking entente among the region's major



ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

maritime powers, principally the United States, Great Britain and Japan. Third, he argued that the United States should abandon tariffs and seek greater mutual dependence and strategic influence in Asia through free trade, but his Republican friends could not deliver and it was not really until 1932 (or arguably after the Second World War) that a bipartisan consensus emerged around free trade. Fourth, despite his frequent portrayal by historians as a mercantile imperialist, Mahan was actually a strong advocate of a values-based foreign policy, arguing that America's international power could not be sustained without the spread of liberty and that the regional order in Asia would be more stable if American

'moral influence' convinced rising powers like Japan to embrace neoliberal norms. Finally, as a participant in the multilateral disarmament negotiations begun at The Hague in 1899, Mahan was deeply skeptical about the prospects that international institutions might safeguard security better than national power and skilful international alignment.

Reading the Lowy report on the future of Asia it is clear that the United States is again facing a complex change in the regional balance of power with implications for American economic access, the global order and American security. And as American policymakers contemplate grand strategy in this new environment they might usefully ask: 'what would Mahan do?'

To begin with, Mahan's focus on shaping a healthy regional balance of power through forward basing, a strong navy and alignment among the maritime powers remains as compelling today as it was in 1900 – technological revolutions, alliances, globalisation, and the US Air Force notwithstanding. However, these tools in American grand strategy towards Asia face new challenges and have to evolve. Chinese and North Korean ballistic missile development will require enhanced US and allied missile defence capabilities and greater dispersion and redundancy in basing arrangements. Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's brief and politically disastrous rhetorical flirtation with dealignment from the United States aside, there is robust national-level support for continued US presence across the region. The problem now comes when the United States and allied governments try to build new facilities in order to reduce the overall footprint and improve sustainability of forward presence (as was the case with the Futenma replacement facility in Okinawa). Managing this 'not-in-my-backyard' issue should get a good look in the Pentagon's new Global Posture Review.

Mahan would be gratified to know that US naval and air forces will remain the most capable in Asia for decades to come, but also concerned to see American dominance of the maritime commons increasingly challenged in littoral areas and at strategic chokepoints with the modernisation of the PLA Navy and Air Force. Former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry and former National Security Advisor Steve Hadley have argued in response to the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review that the United States should aim for a 350 ship Navy given the strategic importance of the Western Pacific and Southwest Asia. They are right, but given the financial crisis, fiscal pressures and resource requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Navy will likely remain under 300 ships – perhaps around 250 compared with the current 282 in the coming decades. That is a capable force, particularly given qualitative improvements (like the littoral combat ship), but not enough to maintain a stable strategic equilibrium without the combination of greater external balancing and/or movement towards a concert of powers in Asia.

Mahan's vision of an alignment among the great maritime powers in Asia is worth deeper consideration today. It would be both counterproductive and unattainable for the United States to create a multilateral alliance in the

Pacific aimed at containing China. However, an external balancing strategy based on greater interoperability and jointness with democratic allies and partners – as well as greater connectivity among those allies and partners – would enhance stability by demonstrating the strategic cost to China of its non-transparent build-up and its assertive stance in the East and South China Seas. An informal Asia-Pacific maritime alignment would also enhance more effective and inclusive collective action in response to regional crises, as was demonstrated when the United States, Japan, Australia and India took the initiative in responding to the 2004 Asian tsunami.

It is worth noting here that Mahan did not advocate containment of other powers in Asia, but rather a combination of balance of power and concert of power (what Roosevelt more memorably called 'speaking softly and carrying a big stick'). For the past ten years American policymakers have used words like 'cooperative' and 'comprehensive' to explain their vision of bilateral relations with China and have sought to encourage China to become a 'responsible stakeholder'. That core element of American strategy will not change, despite the Chinese leadership's continued risk aversion and neomercantilism in dealing with problem regimes like Iran, North Korea and Burma and the PLA's limited interests in transparency. Despite some pundits' calls for shared management of the global issues, or a 'G-2' with China, nobody in either the US or Chinese governments could picture such a level of mutual trust and shared responsibility any time soon. Chinese strategists would be quite comfortable with a bipolar condominium, which is why Beijing latched on to the Obama administration's unfortunate effort to define 'core interests' in the November 2009 joint statement. But no US president is likely to return to a 19th century European concept of concert of power in which regime type is a neutral factor³ (and it is safe to assume that this was not what Obama intended last November, especially now that Beijing is seeking to expand its list of 'core interests'). In short, the concert of power and balance of power elements in American strategy can and should continue to coexist with the precise mix in the recipe dependent on Beijing's behaviour.

Mahan was ahead of his time in recognising the power of free trade in the American foreign policy toolkit. He would probably be distressed to see how the post-war consensus around free trade has wobbled in recent years. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations

biannual survey showed for the first time in 2008 that more Americans are suspicious of free trade than supportive. Candidate Obama did not help when he chose to remain silent on trade in deference to the labour union base he needed to turn out the vote in key battleground states. The President is now trying to rebuild support for KORUS, the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and he has entered into negotiations on the Trans Pacific Partnership, but his passive stance on trade until now has left the opponents in a strong position. KORUS will be a crucial battle later this year in the Congress; passage would not only create the most comprehensive and liberalising FTA in the region, but also determine American credibility in the future contest between closed and open regional trade architectures.

As crucial as the KORUS vote is, however, it is important to put the current trade and financial patterns in Asia in context. China's massive trade interdependence with its neighbours is still primarily the result of production networks that end with Chinese manufacturing and assembly for the North American and European markets. China's ownership of American debt also creates far less strategic vulnerability for Washington than many pundits assert, given China's fixed exchange rates and the lack of alternatives for recycling surpluses. In short, China has a long way to go to 'rebalance' its economy and create the kind of domestic demand-driven growth and flexible exchange rates that would give it real economic hegemony. That should give the rest of the advanced industrial states time to encourage Beijing to advance the kind of rule of law, transparency and governance that Beijing currently lacks and will have to establish in order to have sustainable development and greater trust from the international community.

Finally, Mahan was prescient in his attention to what might be called the ideational balance of power in Asia. He was not a humanitarian interventionist. He argued, for example, that the United States did not have sufficient national power to support democracies beyond the critical strategic regions of the Caribbean and the Pacific. (Before any neorealists leap at that self-restraint, it is worth remembering that we have a good deal more power today.) Moreover, he framed democracy promotion as a long-term US strategic interest that would flow from and reinforce a stable balance of power. Put another way, he believed in what the Chinese like to call 'peaceful evolution' – though in China it is often cast in negative or threatening terms.

The American track record on democracy promotion in Asia has been poor in many specific instances, but impressive over the course of time, as Mahan anticipated. An avid 'Anglo-Saxonist', Mahan saw only the English-speaking peoples as sharing and protecting neoliberal norms in Asia at the turn of the 20th century. But he and Roosevelt also inherited a strategic instinct from men like John Quincy Adams, Matthew Perry and Henry Seward that well-governed independent states in Asia would counter Russian and European expansionism, prevent vacuums, and contribute to a stable strategic equilibrium. They thought that Japan's convergence with neoliberal norms would eventually shape Chinese, Korean and Indian modernisation trajectories and create a more stable regional order. They were right, but off by about a century and only after a convulsive regional conflict. By Mahan's logic, democratisation in Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia and Indonesia and the rise of a democratic India would all be important elements in maintaining a stable order in Asia today. In fact, surveys by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations on Asian 'Soft Power' in 2008⁴ and by CSIS on strategic elites' views of regional architecture in 2009⁵ demonstrate strong identification with neoliberal norms among the leading powers in the region. Building on this generally favourable ideational balance of power should be at the centre of any American grand strategy towards Asia and should guide our thinking about the region's emerging institutional architecture. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's short-lived Asia-Pacific community concept, for all the criticism it received, was at least premised on this key insight. Where his initiative went astray was in focusing on the hardware of regional architecture (who sits at the table) instead of the more critical software (advancing neoliberal norms in the region's agenda).

Ultimately, Alfred Thayer Mahan lived in a dramatically different era. Yet geography, strategic culture, military technology and the relationship of time and distance anchored his strategic principles in ways that remain applicable today. He was also one of the first grand strategists anywhere to recognise the impact of specific regions of the world on the global order as a whole. The Lowy Institute has identified 'the problem of Asia' in a way that resonates with Mahan's framing of strategic problems. And Mahan is as good a place as any to begin thinking about the implications for policymakers that flow from this assessment of Asian futures.

STRATEGIC SNAPSHOTS

NOTES

- ¹ Malcolm Cook, Raoul Heinrichs, Rory Medcalf and Andrew Shearer, *Power and Choice: Asian Security Futures*, Sydney, Lowy Institute for International Policy, June 2010.
- ² Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1900.
- ³ See *Power and Choice*, p 46.
- ⁴ The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion* (New Results and Analysis 2009 Edition), Chicago.
- ⁵ Bates Gill, Michael Green, Kiyoto Tsuji and William Watts, *Strategic Views on Asian Regionalism: Survey Results and Analysis*, Washington DC, February 2009.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Lowy Institute's MacArthur Asia Security Project explores evolving strategic relations among Asia's major powers. Based on a realistic understanding of the region's competitive dynamics in a range of key domains, the Project aims to develop a practical agenda for security cooperation across Asia and a suite of measures to ensure that competition does not lead to miscalculation or conflict.



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