A TICKET TO THE GLOBAL GAME:
THE POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR THE MARITIME TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONTINENTAL POWERS

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Security Studies

By

Matthew W. Caris, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 15, 2011
Copyright 2011 by Matthew W. Caris
All Rights Reserved
A TICKET TO THE GLOBAL GAME:  
THE POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR THE MARITIME TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONTINENTAL POWERS  
Matthew W. Caris, B.A.  
Thesis Advisor: Karl P. Mueller, Ph.D.  

ABSTRACT  
A historical survey of cases of Continental powers – Imperial Germany, Soviet Russia, and the People’s Republic of China – pursuing maritime transformation, seeking to understand the motivations and the reasons these ambitious building programs are undertaken. The presence of an existing hegemonic maritime power influences perception of seapower as being indispensable to a transition from regional or Continental land power to global status, and the rising state attempts to emulate this kind of ability through the development of surface fleets with sea control or capital ship capabilities in order to secure demonstrable global power and further global interests and influence. The apparent refusal of rising powers to consider sea denial strategies as adequate to security needs further suggests the primary motive on the part of the political leadership for authorizing surface fleet construction may be political, rather than concern with wartime naval strategy. Implications of these cases and the political motivations, including arms races, opportunity costs, and other possible consequences, as well as policy implications for the United States in the face of the Chinese naval program, are also considered.
# Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 1

Case Study: Imperial Germany and the *Kaiserliche Marine: Weltpolitik*, Battleships, and a Place in the Sun.................................................................................................................................................. 6

Case Study: The Soviet Union and the Red Fleet: Coercive Naval Diplomacy and Countering American “Maritime Imperialism” ........................................................................................................................................ 22

Case Study: China and the People’s Liberation Army-Navy: Near Seas Security or Hard Power Backing for Global Influence?........................................................................................................ 36

Conclusions and Implications for China’s Maritime Transformation and the American Response.................................................................................................................................................. 49

Bibliography........................................................................................................................................... 57
Introduction

On April 12, 2011, Admiral Robert Willard, head of the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), told Congress he believes the Chinese People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) will put to sea its first aircraft carrier, the refurbished ex-Soviet Varyag, likely by the end of 2011. Various and occasionally contradictory reports describe major Chinese ambitions including multiple conventional- and nuclear-powered carriers to be built over the next decade, each possibly in similar size to Varyag (~65,000 tons – larger than all except the U.S Navy’s nuclear-powered versions). The carrier program, while still somewhat speculative, comes on top of over ten years of fairly rapid construction of numerous classes of new surface combatants. In a little more than a decade, this building program has transformed the PLAN from an inshore coastal-defense force of decrepit frigates and destroyers, aging submarines, and fast attack boats, to a thoroughly modern and growing naval force now conducting its first global operations off the Horn of Africa and (in March 2011) the Mediterranean Sea. Western, particularly American, analysts have spilled a great deal of ink in the past few years describing the potential threat this fleet poses to America and its allies, and drawing comparisons to Imperial Germany’s maritime transformation at the dawn of the 20th Century. Particularly within the U.S. naval community, the rise of China’s ocean-going naval capabilities has sparked calls for increased funding for the U.S. Navy, more attention to U.S. anti-ship capabilities (the next-generation Long Range Anti-Ship Missile [LRASM]), and major concerns over the possibility that China may someday be able to contest control of vital sea lanes and strategic choke points like the Straits of Malacca.

---

The issue of China’s naval expansion is obviously a major one for U.S. policymakers, especially given the dramatically heightened tensions between China and the U.S. and its Asian allies in 2010. The optimistic 1990s predictions of a “geography of the peace,” that the “mitigating effect of geography” would result in a land superpower China and maritime superpower U.S. potentially at odds but peacefully separated, have given way to more dire warnings of possible confrontations at sea and potentially a naval arms race (even including the air and space domains as well). Understanding the motivations behind China’s maritime transformation, then, is vital for understanding the likely consequences and U.S. policy responses to what is already one of the largest security questions of the 21st Century.

While numerous studies chronicle both China’s maritime transformation and other historical cases of nations “going to sea,” the naval-centric nature of some of these studies often leads them to focus on strategic or operational-level issues, e.g., the threats Chinese carriers could pose to U.S. forces or how U.S. naval and air forces will have to change their concepts of operation in the face of such threats. Particularly given the U.S.-centric nature of these analyses, examinations of today’s PLAN – like Cold War-era analyses of the Soviet Navy in decades past – tend to view naval expansion through the lens of a potential challenge to U.S. maritime power and seek to understand how the Chinese might use this newfound naval might in a Sino-American war. This operational focus, however, fails to fully understand the driving political forces behind a naval building program, particularly one focused on surface fleets and capital ships. Nor is the phenomenon of a land-based or Continental power pursuing maritime transformation a new one. Since the twilight years of the 19th Century, Imperial Germany and

---

later the Soviet Union both attempted to develop capable maritime power, including capital ships and the potential for sea control capacity. While the particular shape and characteristics of these efforts were dramatically different, they shared common political motivations. Therefore, in order to better understand the ongoing maritime buildup by the People’s Republic of China, history can be a useful vehicle. Given that navies themselves can safely be assumed to generally desire more and larger ships, explaining why a traditionally land-based or Continental power would seek to build a large, ocean-going surface navy capable of sea control requires a greater understanding of political motivations.

The argument to be made here is that traditionally Continental powers will decide to pursue major surface fleets/sea control capabilities – i.e., a capital ship strategy – for largely political reasons as part of an attempt at transitioning from a regional land power to global player. In such a transition, maritime power is seen by the rising state as the *sine qua non* of the global “game” of the day, whether that be imperialism at the turn of the 20th Century, the global competition between capitalist West and communist East in the Cold War, or today’s economically integrated world of globalization and “smart” power. Key to this perception is the rising power’s belief that its major competitor – an established maritime power – owes its advantages or privileged position in the global system to its maritime capabilities. This belief, in turn, encourages the rising power to seek to emulate the existing “maritime hegemon” – in purpose if not in precise fleet composition. In some cases, where channels for public debate and political participation exist, domestic politics and public opinion can be a reinforcing factor. The resulting fleets, then, are not designed, built, and operated expressly to conduct a particular wartime naval strategy; they are the product of political goals and intended to pursue specific political designs of grand strategy.
This paper will make this argument by examining each of these three cases – Imperial Germany, the Soviet Union, and today’s China – in turn, identifying the “permissive political context” that enabled the fleet-building program, and explaining why political leadership in each case supported the naval expansion when they did, particularly when at previous times they had opposed a maritime buildup. This will involve demonstrating how the political leadership came to view maritime power as indispensible to a rise to global importance. The paper will also examine how the rising state perceived the importance of the existing maritime hegemon’s seapower, and was encouraged in some ways to emulate that power. In order to illustrate that the primary motivation behind the pursuit of capital ship capability was not wartime naval strategy, the paper will then show the resultant gap between the aspiring sea control fleets built by the Continental power and the wartime strategic and operational issues they were likely to encounter. If the fleets were designed from the start for wartime employment – the alternative hypothesis to the global politics argument – the observer would expect to see a naval force more expressly suited to probable wartime operational and strategic problems. As will be seen, that is not the case. Finally, this paper will draw some general conclusions and implications that can be applied in the case of Chinese naval development, in order to help policymakers understand the significance of these political motivations, and envision some of the likely consequences of the ongoing Chinese maritime transformation.

Before examining the cases, some definitions are in order. First, a “Continental power” (which will be used interchangeably with “traditionally land-based power”) is defined as a state with traditionally strong land forces, major security issues on its land borders, and a generally regional status and significance based on its land forces. Imperial Germany after unification, the Soviet Union after World War II, and the People’s Republic of China today all fit this
description. The paper will use “maritime transformation,” “fleet building program,” “naval expansion” and variations of these terms interchangeably to describe the efforts of a country (in this case, the Continental powers described above) to build up their maritime power through the building of ships and naval capabilities. A modified definition of sea control – not as extreme as the Mahanian definition – shall be used, referring to the ability of a naval force to use the seas for its own positive purposes, such as transporting troops, equipment, or commercial goods, projecting power ashore, and maintaining naval presence. Its opposite, sea denial, is the more limited ability to restrict the enemy’s ability to use the oceans for the aforementioned positive purposes, without maintaining one’s own permanent naval presence. This is commonly understood as an ideal task for submarines or land-based aviation. Finally, this paper will rely on Robert C. Rubel’s definition of a capital ship: “That ship type that is most capable in a fight for sea control and around which the tactics of the fleet are centered.” Therefore, not only battleships and (since 1941) aircraft carriers are considered capital ships for the purposes of this paper, but major surface combatants serving as lynchpins of fleet operations, e.g., Soviet guided-missile cruisers/destroyers (Kirov, Slava, Kara, Sovremenny classes), and modern Chinese guided-missile destroyers (Sovremenny, Type 051C/052C/future 052D classes). Since the definitions of sea control and capital ship used here are closely linked, unless otherwise specified, a “sea control fleet” and a “capital ship fleet” will be used interchangeably.

---

5 There are other precedents for this characterization; in a recent discussion at the naval analysis blog informationdissemination.net, Raymond Pritchett argued that the capabilities and sophistication of modern missiles make heavily armed modern surface ships like the U.S. Arleigh Burke-class (DDG-51) destroyers more equivalent to lower-level “ships of the line” or heavy frigates of the sailing age (which could be considered capital ships of their day). http://www.informationdissemination.net/2011/04/on-modern-heavy-frigates.html
Case Study: Imperial Germany and the Kaiserliche Marine: Weltpolitik, Battleships, and a Place in the Sun

The German maritime transformation from the last decade of the 19th Century to the outbreak of World War I raised the Imperial German Navy, the Kaiserliche Marine, from a small force that had played no meaningful role in the Wars of German Unification to the world’s second-largest battleship fleet. This fleet was the centerpiece of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Weltpolitik, “world policy,” Germany’s transition from the foremost land power in Europe to an aspiring global player. Without naval power, the Kaiser and many Germans believed, Germany’s imperialist global ambitions could not be realized. In order to secure its new colonies, establish itself as a worldwide power, and find Germany’s “place in the sun,” strong seapower was essential. To Wilhelm and other German navalists, Britain, with her massive overseas empire backed by the might of the Royal Navy, was the epitome of what maritime power afforded a nation. Convinced not only that naval power was essential to Germany’s future, but that Britain might perhaps cut off the rising German titan at the knees, Wilhelm, the Reichstag, and the naval leadership under Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, would build a massive fleet of battleships stationed just across the North Sea from Britain itself. This building program, and the naval arms race that ensued, would help encircle Germany, propel Britain into what would become the Triple Entente, and contribute considerably to the outbreak of the First World War.

By the mid-1880s, the continental focus that had characterized Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s policies and strategy during the unification era and the decade thereafter was beginning to shift. Bismarck had long believed that Germany, sandwiched between vengeful France and sleeping giant Russia, could not afford the luxury of expending resources on and risking great power friction over colonial competitions. He had famously dismissed a plea for expanded colonial effort in Africa by dramatically gesturing to a map of Germany and its long,
less than amicable borders with Russia and France and proclaiming, “That is my map of Africa.” Concerned first and foremost with keeping Germany from being encircled by Russia and France, Bismarck feared a *cauchemar des coalitions* (“nightmare of coalitions”) against Germany.⁶ In a Europe of five first-rate powers, Germany must, Bismarck reasoned, remain on the side of three. To this end, he resolutely opposed any proposals for colonialism and, similarly, any attempt at major naval expansion. Not only would a first-class fleet be an unaffordable luxury, but such a program would be inherently aimed (or seen to be aimed) at British sea dominance, thus bringing Britain against Germany.⁷ Concerned with European politics and not global expansion, Bismarck attributed Germany’s strength to its land forces and reasoned Germany had no need to be a major maritime power.

Late in the 1880s, however, Bismarck recognized the domestic political importance of imperialism and performed a *volte-face*. In a foreshadowing of the motivations that would shape German maritime transformation a decade later, Bismarck saw the implications for German nationalism, the search for overseas markets for Germany’s expanding industries and economy – and, not least of all, the ability to perhaps damage the standing of the Reichstag’s liberal parties: “The colonial policy was a defensive stratagem. It stimulated patriotism and produced votes,” despite the fact that, in the end, “the new German colonial empire was a disappointment.”⁸ The expectations of national glory and newfound outlets for German industrial output far outstripped the eventual reality. Nonetheless, the German leap into the European colonial race had stoked nationalist fires in the country’s leadership and public. A Colonial League had been formed,

---

press and public opinion lobbied for colonies, and “newspaper editors, professors, industrialists, and middle-class Germans in general enthusiastically supported the [colonialist] movement.”

These same groups – as well as the conservative and center-right elements Bismarck had sought to buttress – would in time come to support the maritime transformation, particularly the pursuit of a major fleet of battleships. Bismarck’s decision to vault Germany into the middle of Europe’s imperialism race opened the door to what would become Weltpolitik.

The German colonial adventure heralded a profound change for the Kaiserliche Marine as well. An imperialism policy would “created new missions for the navy far beyond Europe. The central role of the fleet in claiming and defending the overseas empire rallied colonialists behind the naval cause and revived the commercial argument for future fleet expansion.”

The Navy would be the crucial arm of German imperial expansion, allowing Germany to show the flag, overawe or overwhelm indigenous peoples, and keep open communications to far-flung territories. Thus was the basic requirement and purpose of a German maritime transformation set by the end of the 1880s; an expanded fleet, capable of imperial and sea lines of communications (SLOCs) protection operations of the show the flag variety around the world. The Kaiserliche Marine would also have to remain capable of effective operations, preferably of an offensive character, against either the French northern or Russian Baltic fleets, although Bismarck’s agreement with Russia in 1887 had cooled tensions with the Romanovs.

While Bismarck’s colonialism, brought about by expanding commercial and economic interests as well as evolving domestic politics, highlighted the importance of the German fleet, by the late 1880s Germany already had a fleet at least somewhat capable of a wide array of show the flag operations around the world. While the fleet’s coastal battleships and torpedo boats were

---

9 Massie, Dreadnought, 85.
useful only in home waters, its corvette and gunboat forces completed numerous imperial and
“gunboat diplomacy” missions around the world, from Latin America to Africa to the Far East.\textsuperscript{11}
This small fleet, especially once more coaling stations were acquired during the 1880s and
1890s, proved fairly capable of protecting German commercial and imperial interests, and talk of
further expansion focused on creating a permanent “flying squadron” of cruisers that would be
able to respond quickly to worldwide contingencies and protect German nationals or German
interests.\textsuperscript{12} There was little to no discussion of building a fleet of large battleships to challenge
for maritime supremacy; war with Britain – the only possible scenario that might require such a
fleet – remained “an absurd proposition,” and the colonial operations simply did not require such
vessels.\textsuperscript{13} The shift in German policy towards colonialism did not, therefore, in and of itself
logically and naturally lead to or require a capital ship program.

At the end of the decade, however, the newly ascendant Kaiser Wilhelm II had a fixation
with naval power borne in large part out of his admiration and jealousy of the might of Britain’s
Royal Navy. Infatuated with navies as well as imperialism, he proclaimed that Germany’s
“future is on the water,” and asserted that he sought to develop the navy as his predecessors had
developed the Prussian Army into Europe’s premier land force.\textsuperscript{14} Wilhelm attempted to impart
his love of all things naval unto the German population – encouraging parents to dress their sons
in sailors uniforms, wearing his own naval uniform whenever possible (anathema to Bismarck

\textsuperscript{11} For details on German overseas naval operations in the 1870s and 1880s, see Sondhaus, \textit{Preparing for Weltpolitik},
100-119.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Even the Royal Navy, while maintaining far more robust overseas fleets, had relatively small numbers of capital
ships stationed in Asia or Latin America by the 1980s. For the quote, Patrick Kelly, “Strategy, Tactics, and Turf Wars: Tirpitz and
and Wilhelm I, who had almost only ever donned the German Army uniform), and in this regard had some success.\footnote{Massie, Dreadnought, 163-5.}

While Wilhelm admired the power of the Royal Navy’s battleships, and sought to buttress German imperialism with increased seapower, he also understood the colonial adventure – Germany’s search for its “place in the sun,” – required cruisers and gunboats more than battleships. Moreover, the ongoing debate between proponents of battleships and the French-developed Jeune École (“new school”) strategy – cruiser-based commerce raiding (guerre de course) and fleets of small ships using torpedoes to counteract battleships – further split proponents of naval expansion.\footnote{Sondhaus, Preparing for Weltpolitik, 176-78; Kelly, “Strategy, Tactics, and Turf Wars,” 1036-7.} Strategically, a major battleship fleet simply did not make sense. With no reason to fear a naval war with London, no overseas need for capital ships, and a clear primary security threat on land from France and Russia (Wilhelm had allowed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia to lapse, and the French and Russians were drifting towards an alliance, as Bismarck had feared), Berlin had no urgent strategic problem to which battleships were the solution.

Navalism in Germany, however, would truly take off with the publication of Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783* in 1980. The American theorist’s book soon became a worldwide phenomenon, the bible for “navalism” proponents. While a discussion of Mahan’s principles is not the point here, fixation with the American captain’s arguments that (1) seapower was a crucial determinant of world history and national greatness, and (2) that seapower was best exercised by battle fleets seeking decisive victory over the opposition helped shape naval building programs around the world. In Germany, as elsewhere, the book gained an enormous audience, including a near-obsession on the part of
the Kaiser, who quickly took up the banner, equating the battle fleet with Germany’s national greatness and “place in the sun.” Mahan wrote glowingly about Britain’s Royal Navy; combined with the importance he attached to the capital ship as the ultimate measure of naval strength, this strongly influenced Wilhelm’s perception of seapower. The social Darwinist interpretation of both history and maritime power offered by Mahan solidified Wilhelm’s thinking that Germany’s future greatness – the success of its imperialist ventures, its rise or fall as a global player – was decisively dependent upon its ability to develop and employ sufficient naval strength. This feeling was shared not only by the Kaiser and his ministers, but by a growing segment of the population, “German nationalists searching for arguments in favor of an expansionist foreign policy.”

Thus was the first condition of the permissive political context for maritime transformation met: a political leadership (and growing segment of public opinion) which believed that Germany’s ability to become a global power, to partake in the imperialism game and ensure national greatness, was dependent upon its naval might. As has been seen, this was reinforced by the Kaiser’s perception that the existing maritime hegemon, Britain, owed its advantageous position to its navy, thus fulfilling another element of the necessary political context.

Now leaning towards a desire for a capital ship fleet, midway through the 1890s, the Kaiser gradually forced out the existing chief of the navy, Friedrich von Hollman – a proponent of the Jeune École – and appointed Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz to head the Imperial Naval Office, responsible for procurement and shipbuilding, in 1896. Tirpitz would both solidify German public support for the naval expansion, thus completing the permissive context, and help steer the character of the building program towards a capital ship fleet. Tirpitz had become a

---

18 Sondhaus, Preparing for Weltpolitik, 192-94.
proponent of the battle fleet earlier in the decade, after a career spent largely in the torpedo forces. His famous “Service Memorandum IX” of 1894 translated Mahan’s teachings into a fleet-building program. Tirpitz argued that Germany needed a battle fleet large enough to achieve parity with the elements of the Royal Navy stationed in the North Sea, even though Britain was not identified as the *Kaiserliche Marine’s* opponent.¹⁹

For Tirpitz, a larger navy – specifically the battleship fleet – would “command respect,” both from Germany’s enemies and the German people.²⁰ At once, the battleship fleet would be the answer to both the question of Germany’s place in the world order and that of the navy’s place in Germany. Tirpitz argued strongly against the *Jeune École* cruiser strategy, claiming that the battleship squadrons would be certain to make “even the greatest sea state of Europe [Britain] more conciliatory towards us.”²¹

This was the basis of Tirpitz’s “risk theory” or “risk fleet” concept, which would grow and take shape as a retroactive strategic justification for the fleet plan. To parry the obvious question of how Germany, if indeed it was identifying Britain as its primary opponent, could hope to match the Royal Navy, Tirpitz argued that Germany need not try. Germany only had to build a fleet of sufficient size that Britain could not hope to defeat it without unacceptable losses and considerable risk to its worldwide maritime supremacy. As such, Britain would be deterred from attack and would be forced to accommodate Germany’s rise to global power.²² It was imperative, therefore, that Germany build up to the necessary level of battleships as soon as possible. In the interim, Germany would face a “danger zone” upon beginning its program, expected to last until 1904 or 1905, during which Britain would have the opportunity, if it so

---

²⁰ Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik* 196-98.
²¹ Massie, *Dreadnought*, 84.
²² Herwig, “Imperial Germany,” *China Goes to Sea*, 177-78.
chose, to launch a preventive attack with overwhelming strength. Once out of the danger zone, however, Germany would be immune to British attack in the North Sea or British coercion and blackmail in the colonial spheres around the world.\textsuperscript{23} This was quite clearly a political, rather than operational/strategic, justification for building a fleet of capital ships. Rather than lay out the operational requirements and choose a fleet composition to best accomplish them, Tirpitz saw what he believed to be the political importance of a battleship fleet, and based his plans around that perceived significance. The Kaiser, though occasionally nervous about openly challenging the Royal Navy, accepted this political justification.

As head of the Imperial Naval Office, Tirpitz had no say in strategy – though over the years, many of his former cronies, the so-called “torpedo gang,” would take positions in both the Naval Office and operational High Command. Tirpitz’s task was to win the Reichstag’s parliamentary support and authorization for a fleet program. In order to do so, he skillfully assembled a wide-ranging coalition of public and political interests in favor of his proposed Navy Law and the battleship fleet. In these varied interests and the admiral’s master maneuvering can be found the final elements of the permissive political context that supported, funded, and drove the building of Germany’s capital ship fleet.

Tirpitz lobbied both Reichstag deputies and the German public at large. He created a press office within the Imperial Naval Office, which “plied [journalists] with information and suggestions,” and even supplied articles and editorials about the necessity of the battle fleet. He spurred creation of the German Navy League to “propagate the theme of world power, sea power, and a larger navy.”\textsuperscript{24} The League and the press bureau impressively mobilized the varied interests in the country that would support naval expansion. The general message was one of

\textsuperscript{23} Massie, \textit{Dreadnought}, 181-82.

\textsuperscript{24} Massie, \textit{Dreadnought}, 178.
national greatness – a fleet of battleships alone could guarantee Germany’s “place in the sun” against the jealous British; that, as one supporter argued, “all peoples which have played a leading and creative role in the development of humanity have been sea powers.”25 This attitude echoed much of the thinking done by both Tirpitz and the Kaiser. The battleships Germany would build would propel it to the forefront of global imperial powers; they were not a response to a strategic threat posed by the Royal Navy or any other naval force.

Along with public opinion, Tirpitz marshaled the industrialists – especially Fritz Krupp – shipbuilders, and commercial interests who would support the naval expansion. Krupp, whose Essen facility made naval artillery and armor, and the chairman of the Hamburg-America shipping line testified at the Reichstag in support of the bill, as did no less than representatives from 88 chambers of commerce.26 Despite the lack of concrete economic returns thus far from Germany’s colonial adventures, the prospect of further colonial possessions and national greatness that the fleet would supposedly assure were enough to fire the imaginations of even those whose businesses were not immediately buttressed by fleet-building. Tirpitz also established an effective center(center-right) coalition within the Reichstag whose constituencies – especially given the naval craze among wide swaths of the population and economic interests – were ardent navalists.27 The result was impressive: “What had been the closely guarded plan of an inner cabal in January of 1896 had become the wish of a substantial majority of the Reichstag by March 1898,” with the passage of what had become the first of the Navy Laws.28

While the aim of the fleet was political, to “elevate Germany into the elite rank of maritime and colonial powers,” the specific character of the fleet plan – a fleet of battleships, in

25 Massie, Dreadnought, 179.
26 Massie, Dreadnought, 179.
the Mahanian mold, based in the North Sea across from the British home islands – was virtually
guaranteed to arouse British suspicion, animosity, and countermeasures. Britain could be
expected to respond to a challenge to its maritime supremacy by increasing its own fleet, not just
standing pat as Germany built warships in the North Sea – as indeed Britain did. Britain’s two-
power standard held that the Royal Navy must be stronger than the next two largest fleets
combined (except the United States), and took up the German challenge.29

The Navy Law and its succeeding versions in 1900, 1902, 1906, 1908, 1912, set the
cycle. Each British affront towards Germany, real or imagined, would provide a reason for an
increase in construction tempo and an eventually larger number of hulls to be built. Moreover, as
the British took up the challenge and accelerated their own fleet program – increasing the
number of hulls on the ways and eventually introducing HMS Dreadnought, revolutionizing
worldwide battleship construction – the strategic bankruptcy of Tirpitz’s risk fleet concept would
be dramatically illustrated. Each increase in British construction pace lengthened the “danger
zone” period for the German fleet, eventually stretching it out indefinitely. Britain would not
allow the Kaiserliche Marine, the new “sharp knife, held gleaming and ready only a few inches
away from [Britain’s] jugular vein,” in Paul Kennedy’s words, to catch or surpass it.30 Despite
producing numerous studies attempting to show how Britain would eventually fail amass the
financial or manpower resources to keep up with the expanding German fleet, Tirpitz and the
Germans would eventually prove to be the ones unable to keep up. The question raised by
opponents of the fleet building, “Will the sum total of German military strength be augmented or
relatively diminished by an extreme program of fleet building?” was never satisfactorily
answered by the Imperial Naval Office. Indeed, as the fleet building program contributed to the

encirclement of Germany in the years leading up to World War I, adding Britain to the ledger of countries arrayed against Germany, the relative military balance slowly turned against Germany, on land and sea.\textsuperscript{31} Germany’s fleet program hurt her in the arms race on land with France and Russia, while locking her in a naval arms race that Britain would not allow her to win.

Germany’s maritime transformation must be measured up against the framework laid out in the introduction. Clearly, as has been shown, the perception of the political importance of seapower created a permissive political context for a naval buildup. Tirpitz did not engineer the program on his own; the Kaiser’s fervent belief that maritime power was essential to Germany’s global status and its very future was vital. In the context of the European colonial race, seapower was viewed as the \textit{sine qua non} for success. The widespread teachings of Mahan aided the Kaiser by providing readily-accessible arguments for those seeking both the expansionist colonial policy and a naval buildup. This was critical because in Germany, a constitutional monarchy by the late 19th Century, the Kaiser could not simply force a naval policy upon the Reichstag or the German people.

It is also important to note that this attitude – the importance of naval might to colonialism, and the social Darwinist logic of maritime power – was not limited to Germany, and produced some similar results in other countries. For example, both the Romanovs and Habsburgs were inspired by “navalist rhetoric about the central role of sea power in global politics” and placed disproportionate emphasis on naval armament over the last decade before the First World War, especially given both were unquestionably land powers.\textsuperscript{32} Wilhelm’s logic about seapower was not unique or uncommon – nor was the navalist rhetoric permeating public opinion – and does much to explain the German decision to pursue greater naval capabilities.


\textsuperscript{32} Hobson, \textit{Imperialism at Sea}, 307-8.
However, the specific character of the German maritime transformation, the emphasis on the battleships, requires more explanation. Mahan’s writings helped crystallize thinking about battleships, and for Wilhelm and Tirpitz, the battleship fleet would simply provide more political benefit to Germany than a fleet of cruisers (or later submarines), or another asymmetric, sea denial-type strategy aimed at specifically counteracting the Royal Navy’s strength. The battleship fleet would (hopefully) deter Britain, and force it to accommodate the rise of Germany to global power. A Jeune École or guerre de course (commerce raiding) strategy, regardless of its wartime merits, would not have the political significance of the battle fleet in terms of global power status. A German battleship fleet was the ticket to Germany’s new status; it was key to making Weltpolitik work. In this belief, the Kaiser and Tirpitz were quite clearly shaped by the Royal Navy, the dominant naval power of the era. In seeking empire, Germany also wished to mirror some of the benefits the Royal Navy gave Britain, rather than seek to directly neutralize the British fleet.

What about the alternate hypothesis, that the German buildup was perhaps in response to Anglo-German antagonism, and that the battleship fleet was designed with an eye towards operational strategy against the Royal Navy? The latter can essentially be rejected immediately; Tirpitz himself made little attempt to specify how his battleships would accomplish wartime tasks – instead, he merely emphasized that the fleet would politically, rather than militarily, neutralize the Royal Navy by deterring it from attempting to “eliminate [Germany] as a commercial, colonial, and naval rival. . . the ‘political importance of sea power’ would serve as a deterrent purpose for which a military rationale was missing.”

33 Hobson, Imperialism at Sea, 318.
Holger Herwig has argued that the risk theory was “[a] smokescreen at best. . . [it] made no strategic sense.”\textsuperscript{34} Simply put, it was a political justification for a building program. Tirpitz banked on the significance of the fleet as a “power political instrument” to deter war with Britain and buttress Germany’s standing in Europe and the world.\textsuperscript{35} The obvious rejoinder to the Tirpitz proposal in an operational/strategic context was that a battleship fleet could not accomplish the critical tasks at sea in a war that Germany would require. Simply put, a war with Britain would pose two general challenges for the German Navy. One was close – the ability of the Royal Navy to blockade Germany’s short coastline as a form of economic warfare. The other was far off; the ability to interfere with German colonies, to cut the SLOCs from Germany to its imperial possessions and perhaps seize them. The battle fleet was a solution to neither problem. Unless the British were foolish enough to commit the Grand Fleet to an immediate assault upon the German coastline, the German fleet was not strong enough to win a decisive victory. Despite Tirpitz’s conviction that the Nelsonian spirit would drive the Royal Navy straight for Kiel or Wilhelmshaven, the British need not do so, and could effectively managed a “far” blockade from Scapa Flow to bottle up to North Sea, and Southwestern England and the Channel Islands to control the English Channel.

As some critics of Tirpitz feared, this is precisely what happened during World War I. Germany’s High Seas Fleet of impressive battleships, just hours steaming time from Britain’s shores, had made no major contribution to Germany’s war effort. Tirpitz had been proven wrong; the Royal Navy had never come steaming into the German Bight, offering battle on German terms. A series of inconclusive encounters – Heligoland Bight, Dogger Bank, Jutland – did not result in decisive German defeat, but neither did they dent British control of the world’s oceans

\textsuperscript{34} Herwig, “Imperial Germany,” \textit{China Goes to Sea}, 178.
\textsuperscript{35} Kennedy, \textit{The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914}, 420.
beyond the English Channel and North Sea. Germany was indeed blockaded, and its people subject to slow economic strangulation, while Germany’s counter-blockade effort – the guerre de course strategy so despised by Tirpitz – fell short. German submarines, despite being seemingly the ideal weapon for commerce warfare, were never numerous enough to be decisive. They weren’t numerous enough because even after it became apparent by 1905 that Britain would not allow Germany to approach it in number of capital ships, Tirpitz held submarine development to a minimum to husband resources for his capital ships.36 Tirpitz’s refusal to consider the possibilities of the U-boat and support U-boat research before 1900, and afterwards to insist the U-boat be co-opted into his own strategy as a weak auxiliary of the battle line, rather than as a potential guerre de course weapon, helped cripple the U-boat campaign during the war, and was more evidence that he was not thinking in strategic or operational terms in the sense of planning how to fight a war against Britain. While perhaps no German maritime strategy against Britain could have saved it during the war, there is little doubt a more dedicated guerre de course strategy would have stood a better chance against Britain, while dedicated torpedo-craft, destroyers, submarines, and the like could have helped deter or fend off a British incursion against the German coast. Just as importantly, the German Army could have been given more resources had the Navy’s share been scaled down in pursuit of a more modest strategy.

Neither, however, was the battle fleet a solution for the colonial navy. The short-ranged German battleships – and later their battlecruiser accompaniments – were not designed for global or colonial operations, and as has been shown, Germany already had cruisers and gunboats capable of the kind of “show the flag” operations. The battleship construction plan incurred British enmity without offering an effective countermeasure.

Additionally, it is hard to argue that German naval buildup, or its emphasis on capital ships, was a strategic response to Anglo-German antagonism. The fleet building plan caused the antagonism, not the other way around. As Robert Massie has pointed out, initial German imperialism did not faze Britain, nor did burgeoning German economic power legitimately tempt the British to preemptively cut their rival off at the knees. In fact, in 1894, Britain was closer to Germany than France or Russia.

Instead, the specter of possible British hostility provided an urgent, easily understandable reason for a fleet buildup. Much has been made of the 1895-96 Jameson Raid into Transvaal and the subsequent congratulatory Kruger telegram from the Kaiser as triggering a precipitous decline in Anglo-German relations, and this episode indeed served as a useful pretext to gain public support for the fleet building plan. However, Tirpitz’s fleet program had been outlined at least as early as 1894’s “Service Memorandum IX,” and the Jameson/Kruger episode merely provided the opportunity to utilize a German public opinion suddenly galvanized against Britain. In fact, Tirpitz had submitted a memorandum for the Kaiser on January 3, 1896 – the very day Wilhelm sent the Kruger telegram. In that memorandum, Tirpitz outlined a plan which would eventually grow into the 1898 Navy Law. It proposed multiple battleship squadrons – a major increase over the current German fleet – for a total of 17 battleships.

Tirpitz and the Kaiser both pledged fidelity to the teachings of Mahan and repeatedly cited the American theorist, but as Holger Herwig has shown, their understanding was only skin-deep. Germany’s navalists sought Mahan’s sea control-capable battleship fleet while ignoring or misunderstanding the American’s six preconditions for successful sea powers. Germany was encumbered with land concerns – France and Russia and the huge costs of sustaining the German

---
37 Sondhaus describes the resulting furor over the Kruger telegram as the “catalyst” for Anglo-German hostility, for example; see Sondhaus, Preparing for Weltpolitik, 176.
Army’s superiority. It had neither a good geostrategic maritime position vis-à-vis Britain nor the right navally-inclined “national character.”

However, it seems likely that Wilhelm and Tirpitz really only cared about Mahan as cover for their program, not as a barometer of whether or not Germany was meant to be a maritime power (Mahan himself doubted the ability of Germany to become a dominant naval power, despite its extensive merchant marine). The Tirpitz plan was not about effective strategy against Britain, nor any other possible enemy. It was about a pursuit of a German “place in the sun,” a means of enhancing German imperial greatness and global influence, by demonstrating the country’s technological and military capabilities and prowess. Liberally laced with Social Darwinist language, the Naval Laws passed by Tirpitz and supported by the Kaiser sought to ensure German destiny, as represented by a first-class fleet of capital ships. In the late 19th and early 20th century, before aviation captured the public imagination, warships – particularly, after 1905, the dreadnought – represented the pinnacle of technical achievement and global military might. The designation of Britain as an enemy was a justification for the force. The decision to build the battle fleet required an enemy besides France and Russia; that is, the designation of Britain as the enemy followed, rather than preceded, the decision to build the fleet. Rather than building a navy in response to a strategic problem, Tirpitz sought a problem his fleet could answer. “In order to justify building battleships, the enemy must be England.” Tirpitz and the other navalists were determined to build a battle fleet regardless of the strategy behind it; British animosity provided a necessary pretext. Of course, as has been shown, the battleships could not be operationally successful against the Royal Navy barring major blunders by the British.

39 Massie, Dreadnought, 172-73.
In their desire to build battleships, Tirpitz and his supporters found powerful industrial, political, and public allies. “Naval nationalism,” as Robert Ross termed it, pervaded not only the economic interests directly affected by the building plan, but commercial interests lobbying for expanded colonial efforts, and a public at large whose imagination was fired by the imperial competition. The social Darwinist logic of the Navy Laws, as well as individual economic and political interests, was what concerned the public – as well as to some extent the Kaiser – not maritime strategy. The existence of the fleet, more than what it was to actually do, was the question.

Case Study: The Soviet Union and the Red Fleet: Coercive Naval Diplomacy and Countering American “Maritime Imperialism”

The Soviet Union’s rise from revolutionary Bolshevik state to global superpower encompassed several attempts at maritime transformation, one under Joseph Stalin – both before and immediately after the Second World War – and the other beginning in the mid-1960s. Both efforts sought to change traditional Russian reliance on small coastal defense craft (and in the 20th Century the submarine) and build larger, ocean-going fleets. While Stalin’s efforts were halted by the Second World War and then, after his death, dismantled by Nikita Khrushchev and his Defense Minister Georgy Zhukov, who believed surface ships were obsolete in modern war. However, political defeat in the Cuban Missile Crisis spawned a belief that naval power – surface ships, not just submarines and land-based naval aviation – was essential to the Soviets in the Cold War’s global political struggle. By the end of the Cold War, the Soviets had built a surface fleet forward-deployed around the world, pursuing a strategy of coercive naval diplomacy, but requiring what Michael MccGwire called “the protection of the peace” to operate. Without secure bases or logistical arrangements, the Soviet forward-deployed strategy was unsustainable during wartime, but – as will be argued – that was not its primary mission.
The Soviet Revolution had been made possible by the ground war with Germany and forged in a civil war confined almost exclusively to land. Communist leaders viewed the navy with some suspicion, believing fleets to be the province of the capitalist, imperialist powers, and Russia’s navy – started by Peter the Great – to be a luxury of the Tsars. The Soviet Union, somewhat like Imperial Germany, faced a potentially hostile world on its land borders, ringed by a Europe which would grow fiercely anticommunist to the West, the surviving empires of the European powers to the South, and an unstable and potentially nationalist China to its southeast. Militarist Japan loomed just over a small maritime horizon.

However, with consolidation of power and the rise of Joseph Stalin, the navy again received attention. Stalin remembered vividly how the European, Japanese, and American expeditions into Russia to ally with the loyalist “White” armies and stamp out the Bolshevik Revolution had been made possible by their naval strength. To defend itself adequately, the Soviet Union would need effective maritime power, something the Tsars had usually struggled to create and maintain. Coastal defense, however, was not the only motivation. Stalin also recognized that as long as the industrialization of the country proceeded successfully, the burgeoning Soviet great power would require an effective navy, “not only [for] military factors but also [for] political motives.”40 The ideology of sea power as an enabler of national greatness and a means for projecting political power – not just military might – would be a constant component of the Soviet maritime program. For Stalin, the perception that sea power was a prerequisite for global importance came naturally, even as he sought to develop and industrialize Russia.

Initially, the debates over strategy within the Soviet Navy mirrored the dialogue within the old Tsarist navy. On one side stood the “old school,” which sought to build a conventional battle fleet to contest for maritime supremacy in all four of the country’s disparate and isolated maritime theaters – the Baltic, Black Sea, Northern, and Pacific fleets. This old tsarist philosophy had constantly fallen short due to lack of resources, which admittedly were constantly in short supply for a country that needed to maintain an enormous land force. The “young school,” mirroring some of the asymmetric strategies that had characterized the French *Jeune École* strategy – minus the focus on *guerre de course/commerce raiding* – favored a defensive strategy more in keeping with the Soviet Union’s material shortages. Rather than attempting to build a mirror image of the “imperialist” navies they could not hope to match and still maintain sufficient land forces, the navy should be built around fast attack craft, submarines (for attacking enemy fleets, not merchant vessels), land-based aircraft, and forgo large surface combatants.\footnote{See Vego, “Soviet Russia: The Rise and Fall of a Superpower Navy,” 205-7; also (for more detail) Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*, 60-122.}

For several years in the mid-1930s, this young school was favored by Stalin and the Communist leadership. The navy experimented with a larger submarine fleet and remained largely limited to coastal defense efforts. However, this was less a sign of Stalin’s strategic views than a recognition that the Soviet Union, then deeply immersed in the first and second Five Year Plans for industrialization, could not bear the financial and resource burden of a larger, more ambitious naval program. Even as the fleet built submarines and fast attack/torpedo vessels, and studied coastal defense operational strategies in 1935 and 1936, Stalin was “becom[ing] preoccupied with plans to build a mighty ocean-going fleet.”\footnote{Vego, “Soviet Russia,” 207; Yegerova, “Stalin’s Conceptions,” 158.}

That Stalin had no deep attachment to the coastal defense strategy was vividly illustrated in 1938, when he not only repudiated the “young school” but purged or executed the strategy’s
main proponents (for good measure, he also physically eliminated many of the old-school advocates as well, mostly veterans of the tsarist navy). The resultant “Soviet School” of naval thought, dutifully espoused by the fleet’s surviving leadership and war college professors, proclaimed the necessity of the ocean-going battle fleet, even if inferior to its opponent. In language occasionally similar to Tirpitz’s risk theory concept, the Soviets proclaimed they would wear down any attacking force with submarines to the point where it could be vulnerable to a decisive encounter with the smaller Soviet main battle fleet.43 Faced with such a prospect, any possible maritime enemy would thus hopefully be deterred from risking such losses in an attack. Largely devoid of operational concepts, this was a political strategy.

Under this rubric, the Soviets began planning an enormous increase in naval construction and expenditure. Naval expenditure climbed to almost 20% of the defense budget (it had been less than 5% in 1933) by 1939. A staggering fifteen large battleships were ordered, along with sixteen battlecruisers and commensurate numbers of heavy and light cruisers; this fleet would have propelled the Soviets into the first rank of naval powers in terms of capital ships. Construction of submarines continued apace.44 Soviet industry proved utterly incapable of meeting such ambitious goals, however, and by World War II, none of the capital ships had been built.

Thus ended the first Soviet attempt at maritime transformation. While the Soviet Navy would enter World War II with the world’s largest submarine fleet, its surface and subsurface flotillas would fight mostly minor actions in the Baltic and Black Seas against equally minor German forces, and conduct an impressive – though largely unopposed – amphibious operation.

in the Kurile Islands shortly before the Japanese surrender. It is not altogether clear the Soviets received much by way of returns on their major increase in naval investment before the war. Nor is the strategic rationale for the sudden turn towards capital ship construction evident. Soviet concerns over Nazi Germany and Japan had driven the country closer to the Western democracies in the last years before the war, thus reducing, if not eliminating, the threat from two of the world’s three largest maritime powers. And while Germany was building a modest number of capital ships, the restricted waters of the Baltic and Black Seas were ideally suited to the “young school’s” asymmetric submarine and small-craft strategy against any German battleships. In the east, conflict with Japan would erupt on the Chinese (land) border, and involve the Red Army rather than Navy. Given the still limited progress of Soviet industrialization and the massive land threats posed by the Japanese Army in China and the German Wehrmacht, the Soviet fleet-building decision was sorely lacking in a military strategic sense.

However, by 1935, Stalin recognized the importance of naval power to the country’s burgeoning “Great Power status.” A “large sea and ocean fleet” was considered vital, less for defensive purposes in Soviet coastal waters than to enhance political and military presence in more distant seas. Stalin judged that industrialization had been successful enough to enable the diversion of more resources towards this aspiration to great power status. The building of a powerful Soviet surface fleet would announce to the world that the Soviet Union was no longer the backwards, partially-moribund giant it had been under the Tsars, but a modern, industrially and scientifically capable great power with a commensurate ability to project political and military power away from its shores.

This political need was dramatically reinforced for Stalin and the Communist leadership during the Spanish Civil War. As the primary supporter of the Republican forces, the Soviets had a considerable stake in the outcome of the conflict, but found themselves handicapped by the German and Italian naval presence in the waters around Spain. The Soviet Navy proved unable to provide any kind of serious surface presence to allow easier shipment of aid, supplies, or volunteers to Spain. To Stalin, this episode was a clear sign that a major surface fleet, replete with a true capital ship (battleship) force, was vital to the Soviet Union’s ability to support Communist causes and other vital interests not immediately adjacent to its borders. No less an authority than Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, the head of the navy, claimed that because of the Spanish Civil War, “it became especially clear how important the sea was for us and how badly we needed a [surface] fleet.”\(^{48}\) However, as has been seen, Stalin’s fleet plans were interrupted by the coming of the Second World War.

After the war, Stalin’s views remained similar. Given the rapidly coalescing global competition between the “imperialist powers” and the Soviet Union, Stalin remained convinced the Soviet Navy needed a robust surface capability, and while cognizant enough of Anglo-American maritime dominance to avoid trying to build an embryonic battleship or carrier fleet, Stalin decided cruisers would be the Soviet “capital” surface fleet unit. He argued that these ships could exert the global political influence Stalin sought from the navy while still being small enough to operate in coastal waters effectively as part of a maritime defense against NATO aircraft carrier groups.\(^{49}\) Moreover, these ships were within the capabilities of the Soviet industrial and shipbuilding capability, while aircraft carriers and battleships (rendered far less

\(^{48}\) Nikolai Kuznetsov, quoted in Vego, “Soviet Russia,” 211.

important by the maturation of carrier-based aviation as a primary naval weapon) were still an overly-ambitious goal. Slowly, Soviet naval expansion continued apace.

However, with the death of Stalin and the repudiation of many of his policies by Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet naval growth again halted. Khrushchev believed the cruisers built by Stalin were woefully obsolete in the coming missile age, and that the navy as a whole should focus on submarines, the “only platforms capable of operating in the face of Western surface and air superiority.” More importantly, Khrushchev did not place the same emphasis on the surface fleet as an instrument of political power that Stalin did. In this, he was supported by the Defense Minister, Marshal Georgy Zhukov. Zhukov, one of Russia’s greatest war heroes, firmly believed Soviet strength lay in the land forces, and emphasis should be placed on the Army and the strategic (i.e., nuclear) forces. Aircraft would handle ships in any future war, and the Soviet Navy needed more submarines to stop the resupply of Europe by the United States, rather than surface ships. This was a return to the principles of the “young school,” a purely strategic/operational approach rather than a political one. To put it another way, with the death of Stalin, the acceptance of the political importance of surface naval power had vanished; under Khrushchev there was no longer the necessarily permissive political context for fleet-building.

Indeed, Admiral Kuznetsov, who had championed the fleet expansions under Stalin, was sacked, and Sergey Gorshkov replaced him. Gorshkov would command the Soviet Navy for 30 years, and during that time would preside over an enormous growth in the Soviet fleet, from the largely submarine-and-coastal defense force that had just been stripped of its remaining surface power by Khrushchev in 1955, to a navy considered a legitimate and disconcerting challenger to U.S. maritime supremacy by the 1980s. He gained a reputation as a master politician (like

---

Tirpitz) and his ability to “trim sails to the wind” would be a key factor both in his longevity and his shaping of the fleet.\(^{52}\)

While appearing to be a strong submarine supporter during his first years in office, his low priority behind Zhukov and the Army likely induced him to be more restrained. Nonetheless, Gorshkov set two extraordinarily ambitious goals for Soviet naval development: parity with NATO maritime forces, and the ability to exert sea control (not just denial) in global waters.\(^{53}\) With no chance of getting the fleet building program he wanted under Khrushchev, Gorshkov was content to increase the ability of Soviet submarines to launch missiles, both conventional and nuclear, and increase the threat they posed to NATO forces. He also oversaw the development of ballistic missile submarines and the introduction of nuclear propulsion for the sub fleet.

Gorshkov eventually sought a truly balanced fleet. While praising the ability of submarines to conduct anti-SLOC missions and provide deterrence as strategic nuclear missile forces, Gorshkov believed that the balanced, surface-capable navy was still vital to Soviet grand strategy, and argued as such in his book The Sea Power of the State. In the book, along with two previously-published articles, Gorshkov articulated a link to the original Russian fleets of Peter the Great, ignoring the political dissonance with the Tsarist regime in an effort to highlight the importance of maritime power in establishing national greatness. He also argued that maritime trade – limited though it was for the Soviets – was vital to the survival of the Soviet Union, thus trying to establish a link to the Mahanian logic of naval power evolving naturally from commercial power. However, his writings were, admittedly, an attempt to “explode the myth of the ‘land’ peculiarity of the Russian nation and all the Soviet peoples.” Just as Tirpitz had sought


to draw more attention to the importance of naval power and the link between maritime strength and national greatness, so too did Gorshkov.

The primary revelation in Gorshkov’s writings, however (in addition to The Sea Power of the State, Gorshkov published a series of articles outlining his theories in the naval journal Morskoi Sbornik), was his view that naval power—specifically surface naval power—was an “instrument of peacetime imperialism.” Gorshkov argued that the United States was supported most in its global aims by the U.S. Navy, and that naval power was what enabled the U.S. to “threaten . . . force against movements of national liberation.” In this, Gorshkov was referring not to the ability of the U.S. Navy to fight the Soviets in a World War III scenario, but to project influence, coerce allies, support friends, and conduct all the other peacetime political missions which only seapower is capable of. “The only way for this unacceptable domination to be challenged and checked is the emergence of counter-balancing Soviet maritime power,” Gorshkov argued.\(^{54}\) This laid bare the critical importance Gorshkov attached to the political role of naval power, and the reason the Soviet Union needed a balanced maritime force capable of contesting with NATO worldwide; submarines and land-based naval aviation could protect the Soviet coast and interdict NATO supply lines, but they could not provide the kind of visible coercive effects that surface ships could.

Yet Gorshkov needed a receptive political leadership for his ideas. Stalin would have been receptive to this concept; Khrushchev and Zhukov were not. However, Khrushchev’s power was eroded and he was forced out the premiership in 1964 after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In addition to leading directly to Khrushchev’s deposal, the Cuban Missile Crisis dramatically changed attitudes within the Soviet leadership towards naval power. The U.S. had been able to use its maritime power to coerce the Soviet Union and its ally Cuba, easily thwarting the

submarines Moscow sent to deter or prevent U.S. interference. Clearly some kind of surface force would be needed to prevent an embarrassing repeat. In Khrushchev’s successor, Leonid Brezhnev, Gorshkov found a far more receptive audience for his ideas of naval expansion. Not only did Brezhnev and the new Soviet leadership approve plans for new ship classes, but they ordered a change in Soviet naval dispositions to forward deployment of these new vessels.55

Forward deployment was the other key element of the Soviet political maritime strategy. By keeping vessels or squadrons on station in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and other global waters, the Soviets ensured their naval forces – even if they were not yet the equivalent of their U.S. opponents – were visible to friends and rivals, and could conduct their political missions. For the Soviets, who lacked the basing and logistical arrangements to sustain these deployments during wartime, the forward-deployed ships conducted their political missions under “the protection of the peace.”56 In wartime, they would have to try to make their way back to Soviet waters to execute the more traditional wartime defensive strategy – a move that was highly implausible in the face of NATO maritime power.

The timing of Soviet naval developments coming after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the sacking of the anti-Navy Khrushchev strongly suggests that it took the embarrassing failure of the Cuba incident to convince Soviet post-Stalin leadership of the political importance of the navy’s surface forces. Gorshkov had articulated his theory about the benefit U.S. maritime power afforded American foreign policy, and in the wake of Cuba, it appears the Soviet leadership adopted his view. The permissive political context for fleet-building now existed – moreover, once again, the perception of the dominant maritime power (this time the United States) as owing its position to naval power helped convince Soviet decision makers that they must counter that

capability directly. Gorshkov’s own plan for the balanced fleet was the approach the Soviets would utilize to counter American maritime power.

Over the next twenty-one years, the Soviet Navy introduced numerous classes of cruiser, destroyer, small combatant, submarine, and amphibious ships. While industrial and political issues would continually handicap the development of aircraft carriers for the Soviet Navy, otherwise the Soviets appeared to be matching the U.S. Navy, capability for capability, with slight variations to account for the threat of U.S. carrier groups and the lack of Soviet counterparts. It seemed that the Soviets were after parity with NATO maritime forces, and the ability to exert sea control (not just denial) in global waters. Yet the fleet did not operate with a strategy commensurate with its growing capabilities. Despite growing Western alarm about a surface and submarine fleet with ever-growing potential, Western analysts like Robert Herrick and Michael McCGwire argued Soviet maritime strategy remained largely defensive, protecting ballistic missile submarines in “bastions” around the Soviet Union’s arctic coasts from NATO submarines and anti-submarine forces, and trying to protect against carrier or amphibious attack. Given that these bastions in the Arctic Ocean and Barents Sea were all well within range of the naval aviation missile/strike capability, the impressive missile cruisers the Soviets built seemed more suited to open-ocean warfare against NATO strike groups.

Then what was Gorshkov’s purpose? Gorshkov claimed to be after “(1) parity with US and NATO navies; and (2) sea control in the world ocean,” and constructed capabilities

reflected this, yet the fleet’s wartime strategy was still judged to be a largely defensive strategy focused on protecting coastline and the strategic ballistic missile submarines. As much as for executing a maritime strategy in wartime, the fleet was built for a “doctrine of coercive naval diplomacy.” Gorshkov attached as much value to the goal of achieving political goals in peacetime with the fleet as military goals during wartime; indeed, he refrained from references to a “decisive defeat” of a naval enemy in his writings. Instead, the peacetime use of the Soviet Navy’s surface fleet meant the Soviets could say “The flag of the Soviet Navy now proudly flies over the oceans of the world. Sooner or later, the U.S. will have to understand that it no longer has the mastery of the seas,” and utilize the expanded presence of its fleet in the world’s oceans for coercive diplomatic benefit.

By the time the USSR began to collapse in 1989, the Soviet Navy was unquestionably a major challenge to U.S maritime supremacy. In 1967 U.S. ships in the eastern Mediterranean were hardly encumbered by the miniscule Soviet Mediterranean flotilla during the Six Day War crisis. In 1973, just six years later, the Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean had become a major concern for the U.S. Navy during the October War and greatly complicated the American response, as well as facilitated easy resupply of Soviet clients Syria and Egypt. By the 1980s, major Soviet fleet units regularly appeared in ports in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Gorshkov’s arguments for maritime expansion and major surface fleet units (technical and political problems had kept the Soviet carrier fleet to just one true multirole carrier by the end of the Cold War) and his coercive naval diplomacy doctrine seemed to have been borne out.

---

61 Hattendorf, 25.
62 Hattendorf, 25.
64 Kurth, “Gorshkov’s Gambit,” 268-70; Vego, “Soviet Russia,” 221
Yet the political gains won during the Cold War competition by Gorshkov’s fleet had enormous costs. The overburdening of the Soviet economy helped destroy the USSR, and for a country whose primary security concerns – the NATO/Warsaw Pact standoff in Europe, China (after 1969’s Sino-Soviet split), and, secondarily, the Middle East/Central Asia – were on land borders, the naval expenditures in an attempt to directly counterbalance the U.S. Navy proved an unaffordable luxury. The gains in Soviet diplomacy could hardly be considered worth the price, given the country’s economic collapse. Ironically, Gorshkov had warned against this exact phenomenon: “This underestimation [of the costs of a fleet] has led either to the defeat of navies in war or to the extreme overtaxing of the economies of these countries,” and the ever-growing burden of naval expenditures on the defense budget contributed greatly to the Soviet collapse.

If it seems a stretch to say the Soviet maritime buildup of the latter half of the Cold War was designed at least in large part for political purposes, the alternative hypothesis, that the Soviet Navy buildup was designed from the keel up to execute wartime operational tasks seems more far-fetched. In wartime, it is not clear how effective the Soviet fleet would have been. Its lack of secure bases and facilities away from the Soviet coast would have drastically limited its ability to conduct missions in areas like the Mediterranean. Moreover, the emphasis on the defensive strategy combined with the diversion of resources to the surface fleet meant that a critical task for Soviet maritime forces in a war with NATO – the attack on SLOCs from North America to Europe – may have gone seriously under-resourced. With the surface fleet and much of the submarine force holed up in the northern bastions, fewer and fewer attack submarines were detailed to wage the “Third Battle of the Atlantic” that the NATO navies spent so much time preparing for. The lack of an effective interdiction campaign against the planned

---

66 Hattendorf, 28-30.
American Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) could potentially have been disastrous for the Soviets in a war in Europe. Moreover, the realization by U.S. intelligence that the Soviet fleet was still oriented towards defensive operations helped spur a move to a more aggressive maritime strategy for the 1980s, which would further tax Soviet resources at a time when perestroika was revealing just how overburdened the Soviet economic system was. Simply put, the design of the Soviet fleet suggests that it was expressly meant as a direct counter-balance to U.S. maritime power as part of the global competition with the United States, rather than to conduct the defensive wartime “bastion” strategy.

That Gorshkov pursued this fleet despite the fact that Soviet maritime strategy for wartime remained firmly defensive suggests that his primary purpose was also political – the naval coercion strategy. As has been seen, the Soviet fleet program took off when Kremlin leadership accepted the view that surface naval power was critical to its ability to counter American “maritime imperialism,” protect clients and ongoing “Wars of National Liberation,” and exert maritime coercion. The permissive political context (which had existed once under Stalin) returned after the humiliation of the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962, when the need for surface fleet units to enable Soviet support for client states and greater show-the-flag abilities was made painfully clear. This supports the perspective that, along with Gorshkov, Brezhnev and other Communist leaders saw the expanding surface fleet as a means of spreading influence in the world at large, beyond Soviet borders, and – perhaps more importantly – countering the American ability to do the same. The wartime maritime strategy, just as for Imperial Germany, was not the driving force beyond the naval buildup of the Soviet Union. The wartime maritime

---

strategy of the Soviet Union was divorced from the ideas of what its fleet could do under the protection of peace.

**Case Study: China and the People’s Liberation Army-Navy: Near Seas Security or Hard Power Backing for Global Influence?**

While China has been a land power throughout its history and, before 1980, had furnished little in the way of serious maritime power since the late 15th Century, over the last fifteen years or so China has dramatically increased its maritime capabilities. To an extent, this has been part of an all-encompassing military modernization effort begun under Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, but the emphasis on the PLAN has been disproportionate. A major portion of this development has gone to what Washington terms “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) capabilities; technologies and forces expressly designed to limit the ability of U.S. or other forces to operate in China’s “Near Seas” (Yellow and South China Seas), the waters around Taiwan, or from shore-based installations around the theater (e.g., U.S. Joint Bases on Guam, Okinawa, or mainland Japan). However, a healthy proportion of the modernization effort has gone towards dramatic modernization and expansion of the PLAN surface navy, which has simultaneously extended its areas of operation and occasionally become aggressive in maneuvers and exercises. The ongoing development of the PLAN’s first aircraft carrier, and the possibility that in the next decade China could develop several more, seems to augur for a more expansive, assertive PLAN in the near future, with the ability to operate independently on a more global scale. Indeed, the Chinese have recently begun to do the latter, maintaining its largest-ever foreign deployment in the Gulf of Aden to combat piracy since 2009, and even sending a vessel near the Gulf of Sidra off Libya in March, 2011, the first time the PLAN had entered the Mediterranean Sea. The causes of China’s maritime expansion and progressing development of a blue-water surface navy
have been hotly debated in the West. Many analysts argue that China has settled its land disputes, thus freeing it from being merely a Continental power, while its burgeoning economy and growing economic and political global interests cement the need for increased maritime power. Robert S. Ross, on the other hand, has argued that China’s coming carrier capability and the blue-water fleet as a whole is really a manifestation of “naval nationalism,” and that obsession with great power status and the necessity of outlets for popular nationalism are the real driving forces behind China’s maritime transformation. While there is a good deal more to be said about both arguments, the PLAN does seem to be pursuing two separate tacks – the continued development of A2/AD capabilities like a larger, modern submarine force and the anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) as a direct counter to the threat of U.S. maritime power, but also the building of a surface navy with potentially global reach in order to exercise coercive military diplomacy in the Near Seas, cement China’s status as more than a regional land power, and spread overseas influence through the conduct of tasks like humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR). While the direct impact of nationalism amongst the Chinese population has an uncertain effect, political motivations – as will be seen – lie at the heart of the Chinese naval buildup.

From the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China’s major security threats were unquestionably on land. Between 1949 and 1979, China fought primarily land conflicts against the United States/U.N. in Korea, the Soviet Union, India, and Vietnam. While the goal of taking back Taiwan – now a bastion of the exiled Guomintang Nationalists – remained, Mao Zedong recognized that the “absolute supremacy” of U.S. maritime power, and the willingness of the U.S. to use its Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Straits, precluded any attempt at unification by force in the near future. This lesson was reinforced by the Korean War, where
China saw firsthand just how powerful the U.S. Navy was at the Inchon landings and yet just how difficult amphibious operations could be, when North Korean and Soviet-supplied naval mines forced the cancellation of another planned amphibious assault at Hungnam. If even the U.S. fleet, without naval opposition, could be prevented from launching an amphibious attack by the presence of mines, the People’s Liberation Army-Navy was unlikely to be able to do so in the face of land and naval resistance at Taiwan. The PLAN was thus held as a small, coastal force with an emphasis on submarines and – particularly with the development of the antiship missile – patrol craft.

This would not change throughout Mao’s long rule. In fact, the security concerns on China’s land borders would only get worse. After fighting India in 1962 along its western borders, China would also face a major border threat to its north after the Sino-Soviet split the same decade. In 1969 a series of border clashes around Zhenbao Island between the PLA and the Red Army turned a threat very nearly into full-scale war. This opened the door to the eventual Sino-U.S. rapprochement, and solidified the Soviet Union as a possible Chinese foe, further reducing China’s need for maritime power vis-à-vis ground forces and defense. The PLAN, already subservient to the Army in the military hierarchy, was not aided in its quest for greater roles and funding by Mao’s apparent belief – similar to that held in some Soviet quarters – that maritime power was an inherently imperialist, i.e., American, tool, and not a necessary element of Chinese security policy. Under Mao, therefore, there was no permissive political context for a maritime transformation. Ideologically, Mao was opposed to major maritime power except as a

---

means of national coastal defense (and perhaps retaking Taiwan if the opportunity ever presented itself, however unlikely), and he clearly believed that China’s land border security concerns, combined with China’s halting industrialization and limited capacity, precluded any real emphasis on the fleet. China’s nuclear weapons program after 1964 ensured its place in the world system as a major player, and Mao had limited global interests. Without a clear sense that maritime power was somehow essential to China’s power and status, Mao was not inclined to spend scarce resources on the PLAN.

Under Deng Xiaoping, however, the Chinese military began to change, along with the rest of the country. The abysmally poor performance of the PLA in the 1979 invasion of Vietnam spurred reform and modernization, and the new leader of the PLAN, Gen. Liu Huaqing (considered the “founding father” of China’s modern navy), sought an expanded role for the navy beyond the simple coastal defense roles of the Mao-era fleet. Liu articulated what remains, in large part, China’s maritime strategy today, calling for a fleet fully capable of controlling the “Near Seas” of the Yellow Sea, East and South China Seas, the Taiwan Straits and waters around Taiwan, and the contested Spratly Archipelago. While this strategy would seem to suggest simply a more robust defensive maritime strategy, it signaled two important shifts. First, the emphasis on “control” meant that the PLAN had to be able to do just that – exert sea control over these waters, not just utilize submarines and missile craft to deny them to an opponent. This would require far greater surface capabilities than the PLAN had at the time. Second, China’s numerous disputed island and waterway claims, such as the Spratlys, are largely within this area articulated by Liu. While Liu’s strategic vision or an improved PLAN did not necessarily mean that China was preparing to seize disputed territories by force, the proposed strategy and naval expansion was unquestionably an attempt at developing the kind of coercive naval capability

---

71 Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific*, 24, 158.
seen in the Soviet case. Liu also articulated a vision for a global PLAN, maybe even on par with the U.S. Navy by 2050, which still has some currency as an underpinning of the ongoing Chinese naval buildup.72

Some, notably Bernard Cole, have argued that Liu’s motivations were “internal budget reasons . . . to justify naval modernization.”73 The military hierarchy in the 1980s (and still even today) was dominated by the PLA, and the PLAN then, as now, “has to fight for every dollar they get.”74 This would certainly be in keeping with Tirpitz and Gorshkov, both of whom had their own institutional reasons for their fleet proposals. Yet unlike with Mao and earlier rationales for an expanded fleet – a reconquista of Taiwan, for example – this one resonated with Deng and especially his successors in the 1990s and 2000s. A wealthier China, more developed economically and capable of building its own ships, perceived wider maritime interests than it had under Mao, and Liu’s vision of a modernized fleet and the ability to control the Near Seas and perhaps buttress Chinese territorial claims dovetailed nicely with this new perception. This was the beginning of the permissive context that would enable surface fleet construction by around 2000.

While Chinese naval modernization continued slowly throughout the 1980s, the end of the Cold War and major events in the 1990s would accelerate China’s naval program from one of fleet modernization and rather modest expansion to the major buildup evident today. The demise of the Soviet Union eliminated China’s major land border threat; during the 1990s China would resolve disputes on its land borders with several of its neighbors. The Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, combined with the loss of the common Soviet rival, weakened Sino-American relations,

72 Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific*, 158.
74 Cole, “China’s Blue Water Navy.”
and the resounding American victory over an Iraqi military comparable to the PLA in the Gulf War reinforced China’s sense of vulnerability. This strategic reality, however, tempered enthusiasm for a robust surface fleet or sea control-type of naval capability, and instead refocused the PLAN on strictly countering American maritime dominance.

Sudden and dramatic reinforcement of the threat posed by U.S. naval power – and the coercive leverage its use offered – was provided by the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1995-96. China’s anger over a visit by the Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui (perceived by Beijing to be dangerously pro-independence) to the U.S. led to a series of highly reckless ballistic missile firings into the waters off Taiwan by the PLA. In response, to assure Taiwan of American support and push the Chinese to back down, President Bill Clinton deployed the *Nimitz* and *Independence* Carrier Battle Groups (CVBGs) to the Taiwan Straits. The rapid appearance of these strike groups so near to the Chinese coast was a major problem for the Chinese military, which at that time would have been hard-pressed to adequately protect its own coast from the two carrier groups, let alone successfully attack them. The crisis ended in a peaceful stand-down, but China learned two stark lessons from the humiliating experience (for good measure, Lee’s fragile plurality was boosted to a majority in the 1996 Taiwanese elections). One was a “forceful[1] remind[er]. . . of America’s ability to command the seas in East Asia and the severe limitations on PLAN capability that U.S. opposition would pose.” This lesson tempered Chinese thinking on how the PLAN could handle a Taiwan scenario, and clearly displayed the need for China to robustly develop anti-access/area-denial capabilities to counter American military power. In order to do so, the Chinese accelerated development of their antiship ballistic missile (ASBM), acquired *Sovremenny*-class guided-missile destroyers and (more importantly),

---

Kilo-class diesel-electric attack submarines from Russia. They also began planning a massive expansion in their own indigenous capability to produce submarines, and strengthened a host of other capabilities – space-based reconnaissance, naval mines, land-based maritime patrol and strike – intended to help directly neutralize American naval power. With initial operating capability (IOC) apparently reached for the ASBM at the end of 2010, as well as a submarine fleet that has both modernized by leaps and grown in size, the PLAN has had considerable success in this area.

The second lesson learned by the PLAN from the Taiwan Strait crisis – as undoubtedly it had learned from all crises involving the United States and Taiwan – was of the political value of U.S. maritime power. By dispatching Nimitz and Independence and their strike groups, the Clinton Administration had reaffirmed American commitment to Taiwan and to all its Asian partners. The presence of two carriers – not just one as a “mark of interest” – mixed political significance with operational capability; the two carriers combined could have kept up round-the-clock air operations, including “alpha strikes” against targets deep inland, for days at a time. The advantage afforded the U.S. by its maritime capability was thus invaluable. It allowed the U.S. to put a halt to the crisis – peacefully – more or less to its liking. While seeking to directly counter such American strength through the A2/AD capacities described above, Beijing also recognized the political value of the U.S. Navy’s immense capabilities, helping to shape a perception that sea control, not just sea denial abilities, was indispensible for global power.

Since 2000, the world has witnessed the results of both of these lessons. China’s A2/AD capabilities are a hot topic in Washington, and the initial unveiling of the ASBM in 2010 was

---

78 Cole, The Great Wall at Sea, 154.
characterized as a potential “game-changer.” The ability of the U.S. to conduct operations similarly to 1996 is now seriously in doubt, and whereas just ten years ago some analysts wondered if Taiwan would even need American assistance in securing air and sea superiority around the island in a Taiwan Straits war, some of those same analysts now question if the U.S. would be able to provide that kind of close naval and air support, given Chinese A2/AD capabilities.\footnote{Yoshihara and Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific, 212-13.}

More significantly, however, the last ten years has shown a clear decision on the part of the PLAN and Chinese leadership to build a surface fleet with sea control capabilities and potentially global reach. While the American example of the coercive power of naval strength in 1996 is important, a number of other have influenced both the public and governmental perception of the importance of maritime power, and strengthened the case for building an ocean-going fleet and, eventually, aircraft carriers.

A great deal of debate has gone on in universities, war colleges, and within the general public as to whether China needs an aircraft carrier and major surface navy to be considered a great power. Interestingly, most of the justifications of what such naval forces would do are political or nonmilitary in nature, rather than wartime strategic tasks. Some sources have called it “embarrassing” that China’s navy cannot protect its citizens in war-torn countries like Libya or Lebanon; others bemoan that China is the only member of the U.N. Security Council’s permanent five members without an aircraft carrier.\footnote{Robert Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response,” International Security, Vol 34, No 2, Fall 2009, 68-72} Public fixation with the carrier as a symbol of great power status is well known; its impact on Chinese decision-making is less well understood. More specifically, unlike in Germany, where public opinion helped drive the Reichstag to support Tirpitz and Wilhelm, the same outlets for public participation and the
transmission of popular preferences onto to the government do not exist in China. Despite Robert Ross’ arguments about China’s “naval nationalism,” one cannot point to the Chinese public’s desire for an aircraft carrier for the PLAN and declare that is why China will build or buy one.

However, there are several other justifications for an aircraft carrier capability or otherwise expanded surface navy that appear to have more traction with Chinese decision-makers. One is the failure of China to participate meaningfully in the response to the 2004 Asian Tsunami, where the U.S. Navy’s response (along with that of Australia, Japan, and other maritime powers) generated a major boost in public opinion of the U.S. in Indonesia. “The tsunami experience, then, painfully demonstrated the harsh reality that hard power must effectively underwrite soft power.” The conversion of American naval forces to humanitarian relief assets firmly impressed upon Chinese leadership that global capabilities are required to effectively wield global influence. Since the tsunami, the Chinese military – and the PLAN in particular – has placed emphasis on operations other than war, such as HA/DR.

Naval power is perceived by China’s leadership as fortifying the spread of its global influence in other ways. As the Center for a New American Security’s Asia/Pacific expert Abraham Denmark noted in 2010, the newly assertive PLAN was aggressively operating and exercising near areas of political dispute, like the Spratly Islands and near the Miyako Strait off Japan. While China has not changed its policy of insisting all of these disputes are best resolved peacefully, the exercising of apparently capable naval power in these areas buttresses China’s diplomatic strategy. Neither the Vietnamese nor the Filipinos have the ability to match or counter maturing PLAN forces, and while Beijing’s overtures are peaceful, the aggressive fleet

---

81 Yoshihara and Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific, p. 161.
82 Cole, “China’s Blue Water Navy.”
exercises are no less coercive for that fact. In this the PLAN shares some of the coercive military diplomacy purpose with its Soviet predecessor.

As with its formidable and improving A2/AD capabilities, the growth of the Chinese surface fleet and its expanded reach are evident today. Since 2009 China has maintained a contribution to the international anti-piracy mission off Somalia; its fleet groups have exercise vigorously with some regularity near disputed territories and waterways, and more expansion is on the way. Chinese President Hu Jintao is said to be determined to “rais[e] mobile operational capability on the distant sea.”84 As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the ex-Varyag will likely leave drydock sometime this year, and even if it is only a training carrier, the PLAN is likely to build more over the coming decade. The Chinese leadership has quite clearly recognized that naval power is essential to several of its political goals, including its ability to settle territorial disputes, its ability to give weight to its soft power in either HA/DR-type situations or in combating piracy as a member of the international community off Somalia. The perception, reinforced by the 1995-96 crisis, that seapower underwrites the American global position (like that of Britain previously) is encapsulated in a government study later turned into a book and state television series, The Rise of the Great Powers. Examining the history of rising great powers, the series concludes that “developing maritime power is necessary but not sufficient to support the rise of a great power.”85 The series also concludes that Britain and the U.S. effectively used seapower to establish and protect their global position – with particular emphasis on the ability to spread influence. Such conclusions are yet more evidence that China has come to view its own ability to exercise maritime power, not just counteract or neutralize a rival, is critical to its successful rise as a global power, and its ability to exert its influence and

84 Yoshihara and Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific, 64.
soft power around the world for economic and political benefit. As has been seen, Chinese perception is that the dominant maritime power, the United States, owes much of its global standing to its seapower. For China, not only is this the conclusion from historical examination of the rise of the United States, but it is a lesson learned firsthand by witnessing the capabilities of the U.S. Navy in the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis and the 2004 Asian Tsunami relief effort. The decision to pursue development of China’s own surface fleet capabilities and quite probably aircraft carriers can be best explained by an acceptance on the part of China’s political leadership—as opposed to the PLAN itself—that only an expanded surface navy and gradual pursuit of global operational capability can enable the pursuit of China’s political and economic goals. The A2/AD capabilities, developed both before and parallel to the surface fleet, are a more direct strategic approach to combating American capabilities.

As with the other navies, it is necessary to examine an alternate hypothesis, namely, that China’s expanded surface capabilities are a direct counter to U.S. or other possible rival navies, expressly designed with particular wartime operational or strategic tasks in mind. Leaving aside for a moment the A2/AD forces, which are clearly designed to deter American intervention in possible conflict scenarios and attempt to neutralize American forces and capabilities in the event of war, the buildup of the Chinese surface fleet does not seem to be an operational-level response to the American military threat. While Chinese strategists who support the naval buildup have pointed to the vulnerability of Chinese trade and especially oil imports to American or other possible foes, like their German predecessors a century ago, they cannot articulate effectively how a larger surface navy, even including fledgling carrier capability, is an operational solution. For instance, Chinese navalists point to the danger that the U.S. could blockade the Straits of Malacca, cutting off its vital oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. A Chinese
carrier group would be essential to forcing open those critical sea lanes in a time of war, they argue. Like Tirpitz and his followers, however, they “fail to acknowledge that during wartime the United States could also impose a ‘distant blockade,’ including the Straits of Hormuz.” As the German High Seas Fleet could do little against Royal Navy ships holding the exits to the North Sea and English Channel, a Chinese surface fleet venturing to the Persian Gulf to break a blockade would be easy prey for a whole host of American forces, at least for the foreseeable future. Indeed, in most scenarios against the United States, the expanded surface fleet, particularly the aircraft carrier, is of limited utility. Bernard Cole and Robert Ross have both argued Chinese carriers would be a welcome investment, since they’d be easy targets for American submarines and carrier- and land-based aircraft. Former PACOM chief Adm. Timothy Keating went so far as to “casual[ly] offer assistance to China’s carrier program” in 2007, evidently out of this same belief.87

From the perspective of a Sino-American conflict, then, the surface fleet buildup and the carrier program makes limited operational sense. Yet, the U.S. is hardly China’s only possible naval enemy, and analysts in the U.S. are often guilty of focusing entirely on Chinese capabilities and intentions vis-à-vis the U.S., when this is not always accurate. One could argue expanded Chinese surface fleets would likely play much greater operational roles in any naval conflict with India, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, or the Philippines, except that with the exception of India, close U.S. defense relationships (made closer by Chinese assertiveness in 2010) could well bring the U.S. into any such conflict. Needless to say, bilateral security treaties with Japan and South Korea limit the operational usefulness of PLAN carriers or surface groups in conflicts against those neighbors. This reality reinforces the theory that China’s burgeoning surface fleets and

---

86 Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism,” 70.
87 Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism,” 59; Cole, “China’s Blue Water Navy.”
intent to exercise sea control capabilities in its Near Seas are designed largely to underwrite Chinese soft power, and help ensure the continued spread of Chinese influence, both in the region and globally. The “symbolic importance,” rather than operational importance, of the forthcoming completion of the PLAN’s first aircraft carrier sometime this year reinforces this.  

Indeed, even the halting nature of the Chinese carrier question, in particular, reinforces the idea that the maritime transformation is aimed at certain political goals. Detractors of the carrier program in China argue that a carrier fleet could overemphasize the hard power component of Chinese global influence and undermine Chinese diplomacy rather than support it.  

If the appearance of a Chinese carrier pushes regional rivals into the arms of the United States, the program will have failed in its basic political goals, these critics argue. Since, unlike Imperial Germany, China has not committed to any sort of long-term, major capital ship building program, but remains in essentially an experimental phase, Chinese leaders could be ready to reverse course if negative consequences are incurred. If the Chinese carrier program was a response to a clearly-defined operational need, it seems unlikely there would be this much concern or discussion about possible political consequences – as indeed there has been almost no discussion of potential negative political consequences of deploying the ASBM, which could appear coercive to neighboring states and navies.

While concern may exist in certain circles that aircraft carrier development specifically may be detrimental to Chinese political goals, there certainly seems to be a widespread perception on the part of Chinese leadership – not just in public or military opinion – that expanded naval power, particularly surface fleets capable of wider deployment, is vital to China’s rise. Without naval power, the spread of China’s soft power could be limited, as it was in

---

89 Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism,” 72-3.
the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami. Its diplomatic position in regards to nearby territorial or maritime disputes is weaker, and its ability to spread its economic and political interests, as well as global influences, is less. Seapower is, once again, the *sine qua non* of the global influence game China wishes to play. China has witnessed and taken note of the political advantages afforded the U.S. (and Britain before that) by its global naval power, which cannot be exercised by submarines, mines, and ASBMs. The growth of the Chinese surface fleet over the last decade-plus, then, is fundamentally a solution to Chinese political goals, and not an operational response to maritime threats.

**Conclusions and Implications for China’s Maritime Transformation and the American Response**

Given these historical cases, what lessons, what implications can be drawn? The historical cases have played out, but the ongoing debate over the future of China’s navy and the American response is very much alive. Understanding now the political motivations behind naval expansion and surface fleet buildups more thoroughly, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

The first concerns the possible outcomes of China’s naval buildup. Robert Ross is right to point out that many of the negative consequences that resulted from Germany’s maritime transformation loom as possible implications for China. A true attempt to seize maritime supremacy from the United States, or even just build a considerable carrier fleet would balloon China’s defense budget and threaten its financial position. The events of 2010 suggest that the more militarily capable and assertive China gets, the more its immediate neighbors will feel
threatened, and seek the balancing power of the United States.\textsuperscript{90} This holds true both for the deployment of surface naval power and A2/AD forces, as the deployment of the ASBM showed. Increased reliance on the United States by China’s local rivals, assuming the U.S. accepts the added responsibilities, will frustrate the achievement of China’s political goals by bringing in a force capable of disrupting Chinese naval operations both politically (by neutralizing the coercive effect of exercising or displaying naval forces) and, if it comes to it, operationally. Closer defense ties between the United States and traditional allies South Korea and Japan, as well as newer relationships with countries like Vietnam over the past year or so suggests some of China’s political goals in its neighborhood could go unfulfilled, in which case a dangerous situation will have been established, with Chinese and U.S./allied fleets operating in close proximity in an atmosphere of increased tensions and suspicions, with Chinese political goals frustrated by the increased American presence. Both John Mearsheimer and Yoshihara and Holmes (somewhat less forebodingly) have predicted this kind of situation, with a greatly heightened possibility of conflict. Indeed, Mearsheimer accepts it as practically inevitable that the U.S. and China will go to war in the next several decades.\textsuperscript{91}

China’s attentiveness to its political goals, however, and the demonstrated willingness of the Chinese leadership to oppose naval pleas for fleet expansion when necessary, suggest China may backtrack on developing true carrier capacity. Unlike Tirpitz and the Kaiser, as noted, China has not committed itself to a long-term building program. The negative backlash that accompanied increased Chinese aggressiveness in 2010 may give weight to those who argue that developing a true carrier capability would undermine Chinese diplomacy and soft power. In that case, we would expect to see China backtrack, perhaps limiting its carrier procurement to the ex-

\textsuperscript{90} Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism,” 70-2.
Varyag, and seeking a lower profile naval capability. In this, again, China is benefited by having carefully studied the German case:

“Unlike Tirpitz, the PLA Navy command did not succumb to the allure of extravagant, budget-busting ships such as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. By Chinese commanders’ logic, a *Jeune École* fleet provided a sound basis for a fleet more symmetrical with that of the United States, should Beijing someday see the need for direct naval competition.”

The parallel development of the asymmetric capabilities embodied in the A2/AD strategy along with a naval buildup gives China the option of falling back from its surface fleet buildup while still maintaining its ability to neutralize American maritime dominance. Moreover, China’s great power studies condemn the “reckless” German attempts to wield seapower and its unbridled militarism. Such an understanding would suggest that, again, negative political consequences from building up the surface fleet would result in Chinese leaders slowing the pace of naval construction or even examining new strategies. The importance China attaches to seapower as a concept makes it exceedingly unlikely that China would abandon its maritime transformation, but the very fact that the Chinese transformation is based on certain political goals suggests the Chinese will change course if they find these objectives threatened by the specific character of their naval buildup.

Overall, the Chinese have displayed far greater flexibility and patience than either of their predecessors. China is not nearly as invested in carriers as a concept as Germany was for battleships, nor is China as wedded to forward-deployed surface forces as the Soviet Union. Combined with the greater geostrategic situation China faces with respect to the maritime realm, this suggests that China may be more attuned to and ready for negative consequences, and more

---

92 Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific*, 70.
93 Erickson and Goldstein, “Studying History to Guide China’s Maritime Great Power Rise”
able to change directions.\textsuperscript{94} The surprisingly careful study of historical cases by China – particularly its emphasis on Germany and avoiding the pitfalls of what it perceives to be German militarism – implies that the outcome of China’s maritime transformation may be more successful than its predecessors.

More generally, however, the histories examined here – at least Germany and the Soviet Union – support Robert Ross’ claim that naval nationalism and capital ship or sea control strategies can be counterproductive in terms of being “suboptimal strategic choices.” Ross’ contention is that the capital ship program, spurred by politics and not by operational need, forces abandonment or under-resourcing of \textit{Jeune École/guerre de course} strategies that are more strategically appropriate for the Continental power.\textsuperscript{95} As a result, the Continental power that attempted to go to sea fails at its misguided attempt at sea control and is defeated by the maritime power. This certainly holds true in the German case, where the submarine and \textit{guerre de course} strategies that could have protected Germany from the Royal Navy or at least conducted a more effective counter-blockade were chronically under-resourced. It could also be argued that the Soviet Navy’s emphasis on forward-deployed surface vessels \textit{would} have been suboptimal in wartime, given that the surface fleets were incapable of sustaining operations in wartime in the Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean, and that the Soviet submarine fleet – vital to any naval plans both for defense and interdiction – was chronically short of boats for all its assigned missions. Perhaps more importantly, it can be reasonably asked if the Soviet expenditure on its large surface fleet was worthwhile, given the Soviet Union’s economic collapse at the end of the 1980s. In both the German and Soviet cases, the surface navies constructed for political benefit had significant opportunity costs – both for alternate maritime

\textsuperscript{94} For an examination of China’s geostrategic realities vis-à-vis maritime power, see Yoshihara and Holmes, \textit{Red Star Over the Pacific} 65-72.

\textsuperscript{95} Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism,” 50-4.
strategies and for the country as a whole. Given that China’s naval modernization program is somewhat ahead of the PLA’s, there is a certain amount of risk that resources squandered in pursuit of naval transformation will prove detrimental to other services or to the A2/AD strategy, but China’s land forces as is are more than sufficient to handle its land border threats. China does not face a land security threat on nearly the scale Germany or the Soviet Union did. Nonetheless, carriers are obviously expensive capabilities to build, operate, and maintain, and given that China’s economy has been aided by relatively restrained defense spending to date, sudden spikes in naval expenditure for a carrier fleet could hurt the Chinese economy in the long run. That is to say, even if careful management of the naval buildup prevents the A2/AD strategy or the land forces from going under-resourced because of a carrier program, there is still the question of whether that money is better spent on one of China’s many other domestic issues.

What do these conclusions suggest for the U.S.? First, the expected continued growth of surface capabilities and A2/AD forces will leave the decision up to the United States as to whether to attempt to maintain an established lead, and thus enter a potential arms race. Unlike Britain, whose very survival depended on the Royal Navy, especially with a hostile battle fleet just hours’ steaming distance away, the U.S. is so far removed from Asia as to make, according to Yoshihara and Holmes, the arousal of public support for such a policy difficult. However, with coming drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is already some pressure in U.S. quarters to look to the sea and air in future naval budgets – the continued expansion of Chinese naval capacity will undoubtedly encourage this. After years of war, the prospect of a naval arms race with China is admittedly a distasteful prospect, but to date China’s naval modernization, while thorough, has not yet seriously challenged American naval supremacy. Given the specific political goals of the Chinese fleet program, it may well be possible for China to meet these goals

---

96 Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific*, 52-56.
without attempting (or appearing to attempt) to wrest maritime supremacy away from the U.S. over anything less than many decades. Therefore, while the U.S. may not be able to count on the optimistic predictions of Robert Ross, who argues that a Chinese carrier program will be of minimal operational value and that the diversion of resources will erode the A2/AD capabilities that actually threaten U.S. maritime power.

Finally, if the naval programs initiated by Continental powers are indeed politically motivated, that has major implications for the way Westerners and particularly Americans analyze the Chinese naval program. Some observers, in particular Bernard Cole — whose outlook is optimistic, as he focuses on how limited Chinese capabilities still are vis-à-vis the United States and how easy a target a Chinese carrier would be — are guilty of overly focusing on direct U.S.-Chinese competition and the operational issues at hand. Cole’s insistence that Chinese carriers should be encouraged because the U.S. can sink them fails to grasp the real underpinnings of what China is seeking to do. There is little contention by Chinese scholars that a carrier will enable the PLAN to better fight the U.S. Navy — just as, in Germany, few argued that the High Seas Fleet was enabling a charge to Scapa Flow to defeat the British. This is a major misreading of Chinese intent, and limits analysis to a reading of capabilities. Cole and others are right to be optimistic when pointing out the limitations of Chinese capabilities, but in doing so in the context of a direct Sino-U.S. naval competition, they mischaracterize or misunderstand Chinese intent. China’s study of the great powers, for example, condemns Soviet Russia for “lavishing resources on its military competition with the U.S.”97 If China has no intent of trying to match the U.S. in fleet operational ability, then continuing to compare Chinese forces to American forces is a poor method of analysis. This analysis submerges the true political intent

behind military programs beneath a deluge of force structure, hardware capabilities, and operational assessments.

Nor is the Chinese intended target with its newfound naval power necessarily the United States. As discussed above, coercive or suasion-based political strategies employing naval power for leverage are not likely to be aimed at the United States. Unlike Tirpitz’s risk fleet, the burgeoning surface fleet of the PLAN is not intended as a deterrent to the United States. Thinking of Chinese naval capabilities in operational terms, then, risks dramatic misreading of Chinese objectives, and may present a wrongful picture of how China intends to utilize naval power.

In the end, the realization that China, like Continental powers before it, seeks surface naval capacity in order to solidify its ability to spread influence and its emergence as a global power, should help shape American understanding of Chinese political objectives. The fleet’s utility as a coercive instrument when employed in aggressive exercises in full view of its neighbors can be countered by America’s still preponderant naval power. Indeed, as has been shown, this has begun to happen already, with the U.S. conducting battle drills in the Yellow Sea, one of China’s Near Seas, in 2010 with partner South Korea. While the U.S. can now expect to see Chinese warships showing the flag and backing up Chinese soft power and economic influence in new corners of the world, this need not necessarily be a harbinger of conflict; in some cases it may even be beneficial, as the PLAN appears committed to anti-piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and could cooperate in future HA/DR missions in Asia. By separating its direct counter to the U.S. military (A2/AD) from its own pursuit of surface naval power possibly on a global scale, China has avoided the trap Germany and (to a lesser extent) the Soviet Union fell into. It is less likely to suffer from the costs of pursuing a “suboptimal” strategy in wartime, and its careful
management thus far of naval expenditures would preclude the kind of economic collapse to which the Soviet Union fell victim to. For the United States’ part, recognition of China’s relatively limited political goals for its surface fleet would eliminate the tendency to view things in solely Sino-U.S. terms and view each Chinese platform as a direct counter to some U.S. naval capability. Such better understanding would increase the chance that China’s naval rise could be peacefully accommodated.
Bibliography


