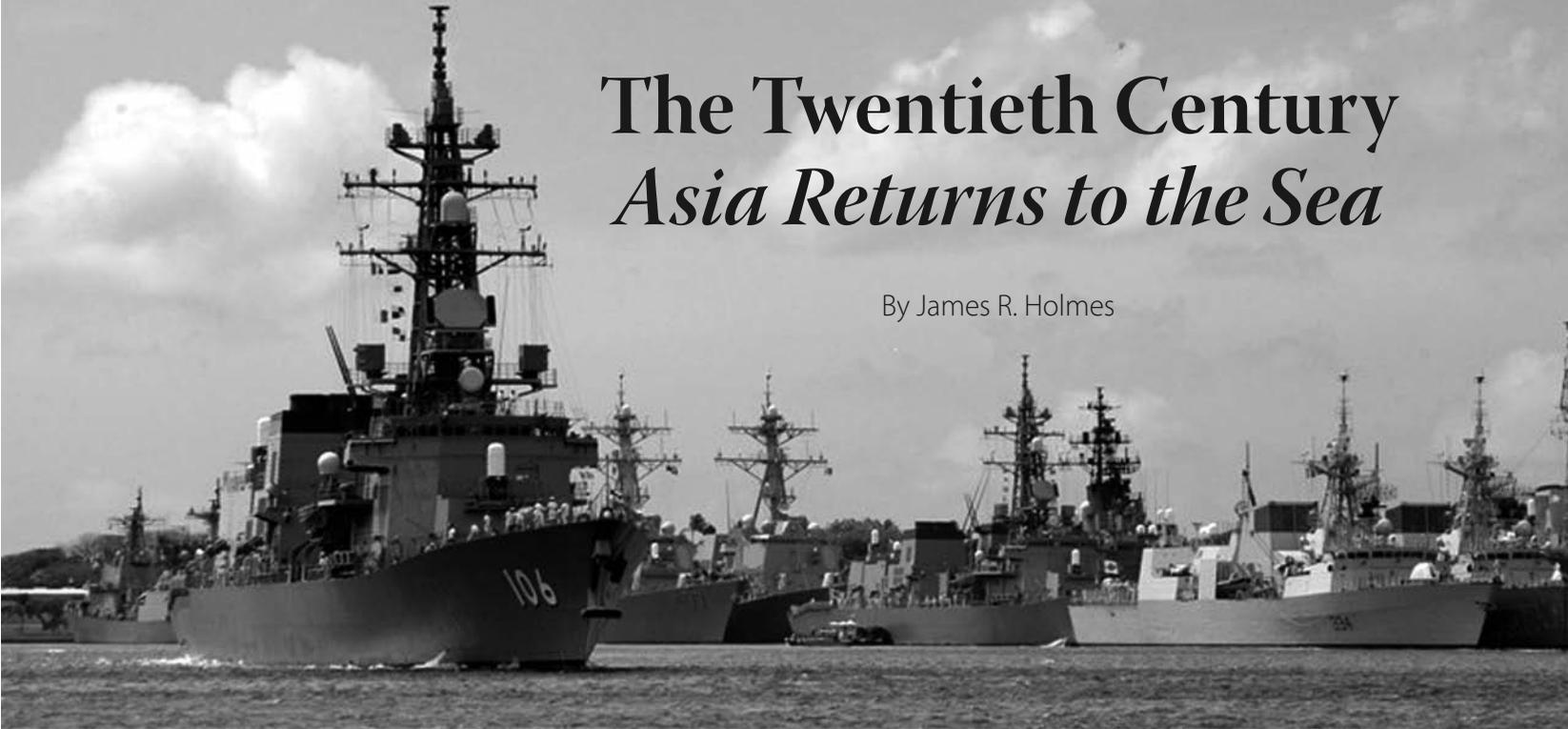


# The Twentieth Century *Asia Returns to the Sea*

By James R. Holmes



The Japanese warship Samidare (DD 106) departs Pearl Harbor to participate in 2006 RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific Exercise). Photo by LCDR Hanada, The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. Image source: The Defence Talk Global Defense & Military Portal at <http://www.defencetalk.com/pictures/showphoto.php/photo/17395>.

## WHAT IS MARITIME HISTORY?

While the history of human experiences at sea has always elicited a certain amount of interest, it has grown into a discipline in its own right. The first step for newcomers is to conceive of maritime history as a distinct field of inquiry and endeavor, and to do so without oversimplifying. This is harder than it might seem. It is commonplace, even among those well versed in oceanic affairs, to reduce maritime history to a chronicle of naval derring-do, and understandably so. Sea warriors have exuded romance since the Age of Sail, while a fleet battle could decide the fate of nations in an afternoon.

However, exaggerating the importance of naval encounters like Trafalgar or Leyte Gulf, or the individual heroics of Lord Horatio Nelson, distracts from a richer field of study. A quirk of historical fate obscured the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of maritime history for most of the twentieth century. Scholars only began systematically exploring the intersection between human events and the sea near the close of the nineteenth century, when antagonism among the great empires was building toward the bloody crescendo it would reach during the world wars. The prevalence of geopolitics during the founding era of maritime history naturally tilted the field in the direction of diplomatic and military affairs.

It is important to acknowledge the breadth of the field, then, even while conceding that political and military history dominates not only any overview of twentieth century maritime Asia, but also most of the essay that follows. Commerce, industries like fishing and oil production, and cultural interchange are as much a part of maritime history as broadsides between opposing lines of battle. For instance, Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean* stresses how factors like geography, demographic patterns, and agriculture shaped European civilization.<sup>1</sup> Fishermen and merchant sailors ply their trades out of public view,

**The prevalence of geopolitics during the founding era of maritime history naturally tilted the field in the direction of diplomatic and military affairs.**

disguising the economic value of the sea, but maritime history clearly involves far more than naval actions.

Indeed, the hardest thing about teaching maritime history is to set boundaries. One way to do so is to refuse to divide the subject up in the usual ways, by discipline, historical epoch, or geographic region. Instead, we can ask what the sea *is*, how seagoing societies interact with the oceans and one another, and what uses they make of these nautical expanses. Metaphorically speaking, the high seas are a “commons” beyond the sovereign jurisdiction of any government, where shipping is generally exempt from interference. That is, the sea is a medium for transporting goods hither and yon, extracting natural resources, pursuing scientific inquiry, and projecting military force.<sup>2</sup>

The sea has other uses, too. It is a nautical “highway”—a thoroughfare that connects every seaport with every other port across the globe and, in the case of navigable rivers like the Yangtze or the Mississippi, with the heartlands of great nations. It is a “moat,” a marine belt conferring strategic depth. Control of offshore waters provides coastal nations with a defensive rampart against rival navies, not to mention scourges like piracy, terrorism, and weapons or narcotics trafficking. Surveying how these metaphors applied to twentieth-century Asia offers a glimpse of potential futures for the region.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY PRECEDENT

The twentieth century witnessed Asian fleets return to the sea after centuries of Western supremacy. Hindu kings forbade extended voyages in the fourteenth century, abandoning their claim to sea power. China's Ming Dynasty followed suit in the fifteenth century, scrapping the world's greatest navy scant decades before Portuguese adventurer Vasco da Gama dropped anchor at Cochin. For seafaring societies, control of maritime movement equates to control of national life—a fact lost on land-bound Asian rulers who neglected the military means for protecting trade. After da Gama's arrival, recalls K. M. Panikkar, merchants could ply their trade only at the sufferance of European "Lords of the Sea." Command of the maritime commons—and thus dominion over Asian societies—passed into outside hands by default.

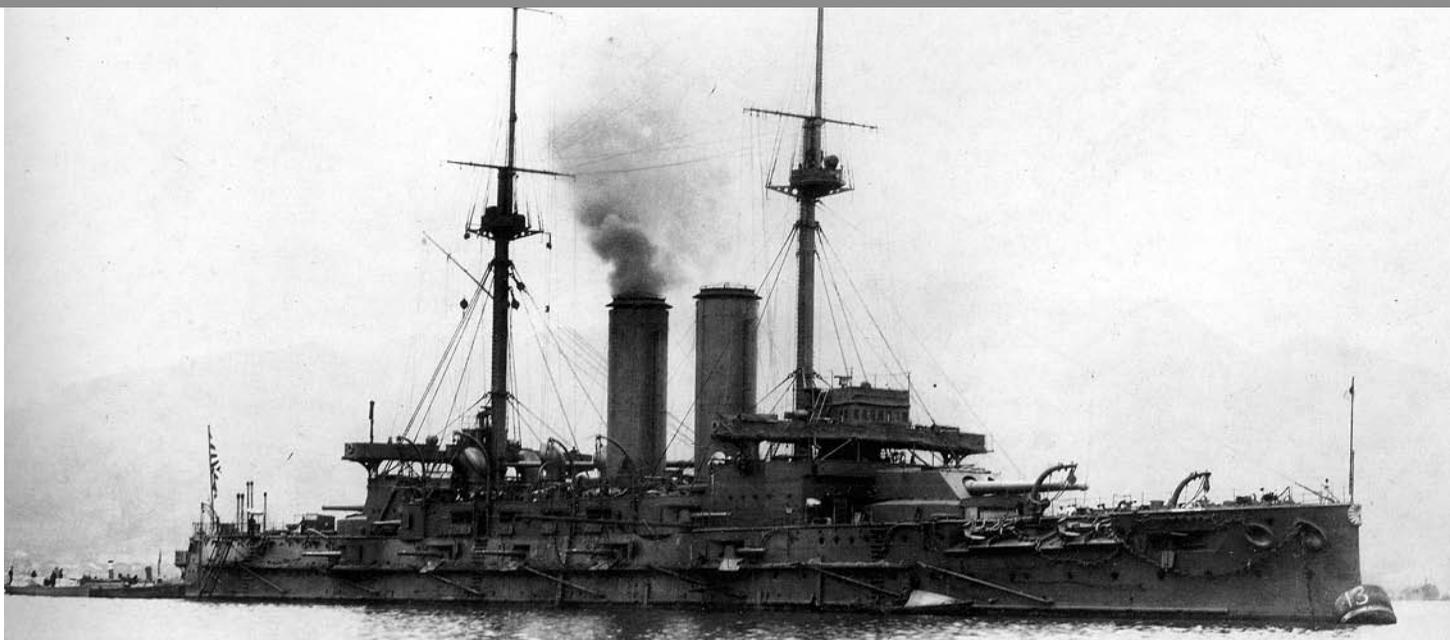
Relinquishing control of the sea resulted in Asians forfeiting their prosperity, security, and in many cases, even independence. This was especially hard to bear for Imperial China, which found itself displaced from the Middle Kingdom's historic maritime periphery. From the 1830s onward, British and French expeditionary forces repeatedly defeated the Qing Dynasty, compelling the Dragon Throne to surrender seaports like Hong Kong and Qingdao and to sign "unequal treaties" granting foreign gunboats the right to patrol Chinese rivers and lakes—as they did until the 1930s. This "century of humiliation" remains a point of departure for Chinese strategic discourses. Nationalism—the impulse to right historical wrongs, thereby restoring China's dignity, honor, and prestige—impels the Chinese people and their rulers seaward as much as any economic or geopolitical motive does.

As the nineteenth century ended, Meiji Japan sought to substitute its own maritime dominance for that of Westerners. Commodore Matthew Perry's "black ships" induced the Tokugawa shoguns to reopen the nation to foreign commerce in the 1850s, delighting Japanese magnates who clamored for trade. Perry's mission awakened the shogunate to the coercive potential of modern navies, especially against island nations like Japan. Following the "restoration" of imperial rule, accordingly, the Meiji emperor decreed a material transformation of Japanese society—including its navy.

Japan leapt into the forefront of the industrial world within decades, an historical blink of an eye. For foreign admirers like President Theodore Roosevelt, Imperial Japan embodied the "strenuous life" of entrepreneurial and martial vigor.<sup>3</sup> Bolted together from a jumble of imported components, Japan's Combined Fleet overpowered a capable Chinese Navy in 1894–1895 before sending two overmatched Russian fleets to the bottom in 1904–1905. Feats of arms like the Battle of Tsushima (1905) electrified Asians, proving that Western rule of Far Eastern waters was not preordained. Asians could control their own maritime destiny.

These encounters set a warlike precedent. Japanese shipbuilders constructed the world's third-largest merchant marine, gladly filling the market left vacant during World War I when European shipping firms withdrew from the region. But the allure of fleet actions obscured the crucial, yet mundane, chore of protecting the freighters and tankers on which Japan's economic vitality—and thus its war-making capacity—depended. Commerce, and the hulls that transported it, remained an afterthought for Tokyo. Maritime history *was* naval history for most of the twentieth century.

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The Mikasa—one of four Japanese battleships in the Battle of Tsushima. Image source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9e/Japanese\\_battleship\\_Mikasa.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9e/Japanese_battleship_Mikasa.jpg).

## 1890–1945

Asian maritime history from 1890–1945 was mainly the story of burgeoning enmity between the United States and Japan. An American sea captain, Alfred Thayer Mahan, prepared the way for naval strife between what he called “the two most changed of peoples within the last half-century.” As noted before, the Japanese transformed their society in the material sense, adopting the trappings of Western modernity; after looking inward for decades, Americans underwent a conversion experience, turning their gaze outward and accepting responsibilities overseas for the first time.<sup>4</sup>



Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan.  
Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Alfred-Thayer-Mahan.jpg>.

In his classic *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890) and ensuing works, Mahan exhorted would-be sea powers to build fleets of armored, big-gun warships capable of wresting “command of the sea” from their rivals. He defined command in combative terms, describing it as “overbearing power” that “drives the enemy’s flag” from vital waters or “allows it to appear only as a fugitive.”<sup>5</sup> Small wonder naval enthusiasts from many nations hailed his works!

The Japanese embraced sea-power theory with singular fervor. Tactically speaking, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was more Mahanian than Mahan. Battles between fleets of thickly armored, big-gun battleships came to obsess IJN thinkers. But there was more to Mahan than sea combat. “War has ceased to be the natural, or even normal, condition of nations,” he insisted. Naval might was necessary to underwrite a peaceful international order, but commerce and diplomatic influence came first.<sup>6</sup>

For Mahan, sea power was founded on three “pillars”—trade, merchant and naval fleets, and overseas bases to refuel and repair steam-propelled vessels.<sup>7</sup> *Maritime* meant far more than *naval*, then, despite the martial tenor of his writings. The high-seas “great common” provided the American merchant marine and navy their highway to and from East Asia, allowing the United States to carry on robust trade. Providence seemed to smile on the Mahanian cause in 1898, when Admiral George Dewey’s squadron smashed a Spanish fleet at Manila Bay—giving America possession of the Philippines, its first naval outpost in East Asia.<sup>8</sup>



Theodore Roosevelt and the “Great White Fleet.”  
Image source: <http://warandgame.wordpress.com/2008/03/06/great-white-fleet/>.

Navy’s main fleet, or “Great White Fleet,” to circumnavigate the globe. Roosevelt wanted to prove that American warships, unlike the

Despite Mahan’s advocacy of peaceful commerce, the Japanese and US navies spent the early twentieth century warily eyeing each other. As early as 1907, fearing a Japanese bid for suzerainty over all of Asia—a bid that would mean evicting America from the region—President Theodore Roosevelt ordered the US

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ill-starred Russian Baltic Fleet (which steamed halfway around the globe before meeting its fate at Tsushima), could journey across the vast Pacific and arrive in fighting trim. Roosevelt saw naval power as a deterrent—a way to manage events in this intensely maritime theater.<sup>9</sup>

Roosevelt believed that Japanese leaders would think twice about aggression if they thought the US Navy would thwart their ambitions, but the Great White Fleet’s exploits could not prevent eventual war, and the US and Japanese navies planned against each other throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In effect, Tokyo wanted to fence off the East Asian commons for itself. Japanese strategists intended to enclose a “Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere” within the “second island chain,” which runs from the Japanese home islands southward through New Guinea. Consolidating this island-chain defense perimeter would mean driving the United States from the Philippines.

Only a trial of arms could decide whose vision of the Asian order would prevail. Prewar plans called on the IJN to whittle down the oncoming US Pacific Fleet through aerial and submarine attack, evening the odds before defeating it in a Mahanian clash. Urged on by Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, however, the leadership changed course. Yamamoto prevailed on Tokyo to strike preemptively at Pearl Harbor, stripping the US Navy of its battleships and carriers and stunning Washington into yielding its position in Asia. Without the naval means to defend its position in the Philippines and the other islands, America would have little recourse other than to concede Japan its Asia-Pacific dominion. Or so Japanese leaders thought. True, the Pearl Harbor attack put the Pacific Fleet out of action temporarily while Japanese forces expelled the US Army and Navy from the Philippines. This left the US without battleships to steam across the Pacific and without bases to stage offensive, Mahanian actions in East Asia. But US commanders improvised using the tools left to them, mainly aircraft carriers and a capable undersea fleet.



Yamamoto Isoroku.  
Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Isoroku\\_Yamamoto.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Isoroku_Yamamoto.jpg).

Formerly seen as support ships, these new engines of war came into their own. Aircraft carriers replaced battleships as the US Navy’s premier warships, commencing raids on Japanese bases in the South Pacific soon after Pearl Harbor. Carrier task forces halted the

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Japanese advance, kept open sea links with Australia, harried the IJN as opportunities presented themselves, and ultimately spearheaded Admiral Chester Nimitz's counteroffensive across the Central Pacific.

And on the evening of December 7, 1941—with the Pacific Fleet battle line still ablaze—Admiral Harold Stark, the chief of naval operations, ordered US submariners to wage unrestricted submarine warfare, sinking everything that flew a Japanese flag. The undersea campaign exacted a frightful toll on Japanese merchant shipping, starving the island nation of irreplaceable natural resources and war materiel.

No less a figure than wartime Prime Minister General Tōjō Hideki credited the remorseless submarine offensive as one primary cause of Imperial Japan's downfall. Another was the US Navy's ability to remain at sea indefinitely. Mariners finally overcame the tyranny of distance in the Pacific by developing techniques for refueling, rearming, and re-provisioning while at sea. America upheld its vision of a unified Pacific commons, preventing Japan from making these waters a military and commercial bastion.

### THE COLD WAR AT SEA

Victory left the United States atop the Asian maritime order, where it remains six decades hence. Asia was a backwater in the Cold War, in large part because everyone expected the main conflict to take place in Europe. Deprived of an antagonist comparable in stature to the IJN, the US Navy fought no fleet actions after Leyte Gulf in 1944. Instead, it performed dual functions in Asia, executing Washington's "containment" strategy vis-à-vis the communist world while guarding against lesser threats like piracy and weapons trafficking. It discharged both functions with invaluable help from Asian seafarers, while forward bases anchored the United States' position in the region.

Without allies, in short, Washington had few options in Asia. Much of Asia remained passive at sea. South Korea and the Philippines granted the United States basing rights throughout the Cold War but never developed powerful fleets of their own. Seoul and Manila had higher priorities, namely rebuilding nations debilitated by imperialism and war. While Indians openly coveted a blue-water fleet, Great Britain's partition of the Royal Indian Navy between newly independent India and Pakistan left New Delhi with the barest rudiments of a navy. Japan, as we shall see, was another matter.

What was containment? Championed by diplomat George F. Kennan in the late 1940s, containment envisioned keeping Soviet expansion in check until the ideologically driven communist regime mellowed or collapsed under its own weight.



George F. Kennan, 1947. Image source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George\\_F.\\_Kennan\\_1947.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_F._Kennan_1947.jpg).

Secretary of State Dean Acheson defined the geography of containment in 1950. Acheson sketched a US "defense perimeter of the Pacific" along the "first island chain," which runs parallel to the Asian seaboard, from Japan through the Philippines. From bases in the island chain, US and allied forces could monitor and constrict Soviet and Chinese activity while radiating power into the continent.

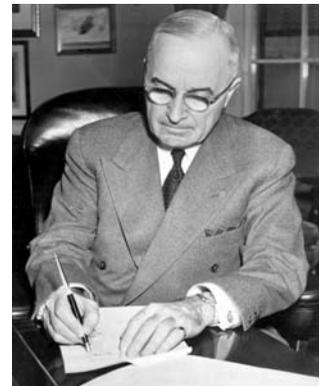
Mao Zedong scoffed at sea power, opting for a Chinese Navy sufficient to defend coastal waters. Events, however, would soon underscore the dangers of maritime apathy. During the Korean War, for instance, President Harry Truman ordered the US Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait—cutting communications between the island and the mainland and showing that a maritime superpower dominated China's immediate nautical environs. Even so, Mao's indifference persisted.

If China paid the sea little attention, Japan launched into a maritime renaissance. It is little exaggeration to describe the IJN's successor, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), as an arm of the US Navy. Indeed, JMSDF mariners revere Admiral Arleigh Burke, a post-war chief of naval operations, as the father of their service. Tokyo allied itself with one erstwhile foe, the United States, to restrain the naval ambitions of two others, the Soviet Union and China.

In effect, then, the JMSDF was the co-executor of containment. Containment concentrated US and Japanese energies on one sea-control mission, namely antisubmarine warfare (ASW). The Japanese home islands comprise the northern arc of the first island chain, which envelops the Russian Far East coastline. Soviet ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) had to penetrate this natural barrier to reach patrol grounds in the Pacific basin. Maritime geography ideally positioned the JMSDF to contain the Soviet Pacific Fleet and its SSBNs.

Despite enormous efforts to develop technology that renders the seas transparent, submarines remain almost impervious to detection and attack from surface ships and aircraft. Even so, JMSDF crews mastered the difficult art of tracking submarines, plugging a gap in US naval strategy. Sonar-equipped submarines, ships, and aircraft took to loitering near the narrow seas through which Soviet SSBNs exited the Seas of Japan and Okhotsk. Soviet skippers often chose to remain landward of the island chain rather than risk being detected, tracked, and, in wartime, sunk.

If finding and sinking an enemy's undersea deterrent force pre-occupied strategists and tacticians, nuclear weapons virtually ruled out major fleet-on-fleet battles. After all, the side facing defeat in a Mahanian engagement might resort to nuclear war—a risk seldom worth running. As traditional battle receded as a naval mission,



President Truman signing the proclamation declaring a national emergency that began US involvement in Korea. Image source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Truman\\_initiating\\_Korean\\_involvement.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Truman_initiating_Korean_involvement.jpg).



The People's Republic of China destroyer Harbin (DD 112) pulls into San Diego, Calif., on March 21, 1997, for a first-ever visit to the mainland US by People's Republic of China Navy ships. Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Felix Garza, U. S. Navy.  
Image source: United States Department of Defense News Web site at <http://www.defenselink.mil/photos/newsphoto.aspx?newsphotoid=578>.

**In China, Mao's death allowed for new thinking about naval power. . . .**  
**Admiral Liu Huaqing, commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), felt free to lay the intellectual groundwork for Chinese sea power.**

other missions came to the forefront. The US Navy performed limited combat missions, projecting power into Korea and Việt Nam with gunfire and naval air strikes. Gunboat diplomacy made a comeback. Ships cruising offshore or conducting port visits provided tangible reassurance of America's commitment to the defense of its Asian allies.

The Asian seas started getting crowded by the end of the Cold War. The rise of the JMSDF foreshadowed the resurgence of indigenous fleets. In China, Mao's death allowed for new thinking about naval power. During Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening era, Admiral Liu Huaqing, commander



"China's Mahan," Liu Huaqing.  
Image source: [http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/Liu\\_Huaqing.jpg](http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/Liu_Huaqing.jpg).

of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), felt free to lay the intellectual groundwork for Chinese sea power. Known in the West as "China's Mahan," Liu espoused a phased naval buildup. The PLA Navy would first assert sea control within the first island chain, then extend its reach out to the second island chain, and finally—by 2050 or so—take its place as a global navy on par with the US Navy.

Reclaiming Taiwan was crucial to restoring national unity, banishing China's century of humiliation, and underwriting Beijing's bid for sea power. PLA bases on the island would guarantee Chinese naval access to the Pacific high seas, extend China's defense perimeter offshore, and assure free passage for Chinese shipping along the Asian coastline. To Beijing, the benefits of regaining Taiwan were, and are, manifold. Defense of China's moat and liberty to use the commons could depend on it.

## THE COMMONS AFTER THE COLD WAR

**C**learly, political and military history played an outsized part in Asian maritime history for most of the twentieth century. Such factors have subsided in the era of globalization but have not disappeared entirely—and they could resume their former prominence. A look at the aquatic commons today reveals a mélange of old issues, new issues, and old issues that have taken on new urgency.

Perhaps the most significant factor influencing the Asian order is the diplomatic, economic, and military rise of China. As noted above, China's maritime rise had its origins during the reform and opening era of the 1970s and 1980s, when economic openness impressed on Chinese leaders the value of the sea as a medium for importing natural resources and transporting finished goods to buyers overseas. Building a modern fleet seemed an obvious corollary to economic development.

This was especially true after the Soviet Union's collapse discredited communism, prompting the Chinese Communist leadership to look elsewhere for legitimacy. Improving living standards for the Chinese populace took its place at the center of national policy. Interruptions to seagoing traffic could endanger economic development—imperiling the regime's chances for survival.

At the same time, events exposed China's naval weakness, even in its immediate environs. The Clinton administration ordered two aircraft-carrier battle groups to Taiwan's vicinity in 1995–1996, after the PLA conducted "missile tests" to discourage formal Taiwanese independence. The PLA was unable to counter the US deployment; indeed, it was unable to track or even detect the American task forces. Chinese strategists vowed never again to suffer such a debacle, or to see vital Chinese interests held hostage in times of crisis.

By century's end, accordingly, Chinese defense budgets were beginning to favor the navy over the army and air force—a striking turnabout for a nation historically obsessed with continental defense. Accustomed to ruling the Asian seas, US mariners long mocked China's naval capacity, joking that the PLA Navy could retake Taiwan only



Indian Navy Ships. Image source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian\\_Navy\\_ships.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Navy_ships.jpg).

through a “million-man swim” across the Strait. But Beijing defied Western expectations, negotiating purchases of frontline Russian surface warships, diesel submarines, and combat aircraft. It aggressively built up its domestic defense industry, manufacturing its own hardware. And it promoted naval officers to influential posts, bestowing newfound prestige on the PLA Navy and helping the service advance its bureaucratic interests vis-à-vis the army and air force. Many Westerners now acknowledge, if grudgingly, the success of Chinese naval development.

Japan also rethought its place in Asian politics after the Cold War, edging away from the strictly pacifist foreign policy mandated by its constitution. Threats emanating from nearby seas and skies applied a catalyst. In 1998, a North Korean missile launch through Japanese airspace aggravated Tokyo’s sense of threat (as have the North’s recent nuclear and missile tests). To ward off missile attack, the JMSDF procured destroyers equipped with the Aegis combat system—the latest in American air-defense wizardry—and joined the US Navy’s ballistic-missile-defense program. The growth of Chinese political and naval power, meanwhile, prompted Tokyo to bind itself even more tightly to the United States under the US-Japan Security Treaty.

A growing sense of international responsibility also informs Japanese thinking. Roundly criticized for failing to deploy forces for the 1990–1991 Gulf War, Japanese leaders dispatched JMSDF minesweepers after the ceasefire. Mine clearance marked Japan’s first overseas naval deployment since 1945. Since the events of September 11, JMSDF vessels have helped patrol the Indian Ocean for terrorists fleeing Afghanistan, rendered aid following the 2004 tsunami, and battled pirates off Somalia. “International peace support operations,” to use the Japanese phrase, are now a core function of the sea services.

India embarked on economic reforms of its own in the early 1990s. Like Beijing, New Delhi is mindful that the shipping lanes crisscrossing the Indian Ocean constitute a highway for natural resources and finished wares. Indian naval development trails that of China. A generally friendly US Navy dominated regional waters after the Cold War, in effect allowing New Delhi to free-ride on US-supplied maritime security. India has used the resulting strategic holiday to experiment with a blue-water fleet without siphoning off resources needed for economic development, the nation’s top priority.

The Indian Navy’s future remains uncertain. The heavily bureaucratic Indian defense-industrial base—the complex of shipyards and weapons manufacturers that produce naval hardware—has repeatedly

missed deadlines and fallen short of quality standards. Nor have foreign acquisitions been a panacea. The Indian military’s habit of purchasing equipment from numerous foreign suppliers gives rise to compatibility (“interoperability,” in military lingo) problems within the fleet. Doubts linger, despite New Delhi’s worries about Chinese naval power and ambitions for a state-of-the-art navy.

## ROUGH SEAS AHEAD?

**M**any trends on display in Asia today had their origins during the twentieth century. Now, as throughout history, the Asian seas remain a commons for economic and military interaction, a highway connecting seaports throughout the region (and beyond) with one another, and a moat buffering Asian nations against seaborne threats and challenges. This essay by no means represents the last word on maritime history in Asia, but I hope it offers a useful first word. Asia is resuming its central place in world politics, at sea as in other fields of endeavor. The rise of Chinese and Indian sea power, Japanese ambivalence about marine affairs, and the uncertain longevity of American naval mastery, all promise to make the coming century a fascinating if turbulent age. ■

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