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The Failing Naval Deterrence and the Understated Proneness to War between China and the United States

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Abstract

In the human history of warfare and great power contests, ample examples point to competitions and confrontations around the sea. When waterbodies cut great powers off from existential threats, countries still pay close attention to their safety at sea. Contrary to some scholarly forecasts that sea may geographically safeguard the relations between China and the United States, today's world sees an intensifying danger of military clash as China is expanding its naval assets and the U.S. reluctant to give up its naval hegemony. What is the likelihood of war between China and the U.S. relative to that during the Cold War, considering the existence of waters that separates the two players and significantly limits the possibilities of a land war? This thesis addresses the facilitative role of waterbodies in a great power competition and argues that a water-rich geopolitical setting that only allows for a naval war – for example the Indo-Pacific – would be much more war-prone than those in which land wars may break out – in a case such as the central front during the Cold War. By examining the potential hotspots in the Sino-U.S. security competition, it raises that, for geographical reasons a war will most likely take place at sea should it really happen. Meanwhile, the limited nature of naval wars, resulting in the smaller risk of escalation of conflicts at sea and the lack of offense-defense distinguishability contributes to the overall fragility of naval deterrence and war-proneness in East Asia. When naval war is the only option of warfare, the structural factors join together and force the proneness for a great power competition to evolve into a hegemonic war to become much greater. Therefore, the current academia is underestimating the probability of a war between China and the U.S., due to the underappreciated facilitating effect of the naval component.

Introduction

Mankind lives on land, and the foundations of states are primarily based on the continent. Nevertheless, in the human history of warfare and great power contests, there is ample evidence of maritime competitions and confrontations. Great powers are anxious about their safety at sea, even when they are physically cut apart from existential threats on land. Now as the rising China becomes a potential hegemon, expands its naval forces and challenges the status-quo led by the United States, researchers have been interested in raising explanations about the possibility of a naval war between the two great powers. This thesis addresses the question on how the likelihood of war has been influenced by the water-rich geopolitical setting in East Asia, in comparison to that during the Cold War, when the two camps had their core interests concentrated on the continental Europe and were neighboring each other.

I argue that the existence of waters separates the great power players and, as a physical barrier, significantly limits the possibilities of a land war. However, as a result of the improbability of land warfare, China and the U.S. are more likely to resort to force at sea when their clash of interests become irreconcilable. whereas the land-dominant geographics of the Cold War actually motivates the competitors to deter each other's aggressions, deterrence counterintuitively is likely to fail in water-rich East Asia and the likelihood for a naval war to break out becomes alarmingly high.

In order to illustrate the points made above, this thesis is composed of the following parts. To begin with, it reviews some existing literature on the nature of naval forces and sea power. While there indeed exists an insurmountable barrier that stops great powers from invading the mainland of each other across the seas, such stopping power also plays a facilitating role when the sea is seen as a "great common", when great powers struggle over its access.¹ In the following, by comparing the Cold War to the ongoing naval competition between China and the U.S., the research observes that the risk for a war to break out in maritime East Asia is much higher than that in the European central front. Due to the specialness of naval warfare, deterring a naval aggression from a naval power takes a conceptually different logic than deterring a land invasion and faces the risk to fail.

The geographical setting in Asia decides that a war will most likely take place at sea should it really happen between China and the U.S. In such circumstance, the subtle importance of sea power provides a privilege to fight a war without as much cost inflicted. As one may observe from the history in the Russo-Japanese War, naval factors have been no less importance to state survival in the long term. They might not pose an immediate existential threat as a fight over territories

¹ Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 8-12.

may bring about, but maritime security is a concern serious enough to make great powers fearful of its adversary's naval developments and tempted to eliminate the threat with a naval war. On another hand, it is also believed that naval wars are by definition limited, id est a smaller stake is involved. Taken together, the naval considerations are not worthy of a total, nuclear war, but is important enough to fight for. Wars are thus more "imaginable" and "controllable" when the use of force can be restricted at sea. Leaders are convinced that the risk of escalation of conflicts at sea is smaller than of those on land – bearing the maneuverability in mind, countries think they can call back or restrain the use of force and level of aggression whenever necessary. In addition, there is little to no distinguishability between offense and defense when it comes to naval forces. As soon as a great power starts to build up its navy, it is automatically perceived as an offensive move and therefore raises alarm to the rival state.

When naval war is the only option of warfare, just as the case of the Sino-U.S. naval competition, the structural factors join together and force the proneness for a great power competition to evolve into a hegemonic war to become much greater – and people may observe such a trend in the intensifying naval competition between China and the United States, especially as the previously stable A2/AD deterrence relationship breaks apart. Based on the theoretical findings, I conclude by laying out the trajectory of the maritime competition between China and the U.S. in the future. Contrary to the optimistic predictions that water might halt the conflict and promote peace in East Asia, the very existence of waterbodies that deprives the two countries from conventional ways to threaten each other on land actually increases the risk of war, making the geopolitics volatile.

Literature Review

To lay out the theoretical foundations of the research, the literature review offers a brief recap of realism and its approaches to understand international politics. Great powers make the entirety of the realist narrative, and they are largely defined in military terms. A great power is a state that "plays a major role in international politics with respect to security-related issues."² From a realist perspective, great powers interact in world politics following the bedrock assumptions. 1) The nature of the international system is anarchic. 2) Countries possess and are ready to use their offensive military capabilities. 3) Countries are uncertain about each other's intentions. 4) The

² Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 10-19.

primary goal for all countries is to survive. 5). All countries are rational actors. As a result of these underlying logics, states fear each other, have to live by themselves in the self-help world and need to maximize their relative share of world power to increase the prospect of survival. ³

It is in such an environment where great powers constantly confront one another in security competitions and, in their most fierce format, wars. In the process, they use military power to defend themselves, to attack others, and to deter aggression in peacetime. Some geographical conditions, such as marshes or mountains also discourages the use of force and reduces the likelihood of war to different extents. For a long time, waterbodies have been recognized as a great deterrent that poses a significant limit to great powers' expansion. This "stopping power" of large bodies of water "profoundly limit an army's power-projection capability... Water is a forbidding barrier when a navy attempts to deliver an army onto territory controlled and well-defended by a rival great power." ⁴ Oceans around the world that takes more than 70 per cent of Earth surface therefore halts land invasions and makes overseas conquests especially difficult.

This stopping power of waterbodies, however, is falsely translated by many scholars and policy analysts as a guarantee of peace. Some equates this stopping power to an immunity of threats granted to any water-surrounded country, and others raise that the existence of water in great power politics inherently brings stability, as both sides lack the means of posing an existential threat on each other. They argue that, more than preventing land invasions, the rich presence of water may be able to deter any offensive moves between the two great power competitors, as countries are content with their security of homeland and do not pay much attention to the gains at sea. Since one would never be able to endanger the mainland of another, there is no way two water-separated great powers would ever fight.

Robert Ross in *The Geography of the Peace* contends that although "both China and the U.S. have the geographic assets to potentially challenge each other and that that they are destined to be great power competitors," the bipolarity between the two great powers is likely to remain "stable and relatively peaceful". ⁵ Ross argues that China has already been an established dominator of mainland East Asia since 1991, as by then it owns the strongest Army in continental East Asia, and no bordering country has been able to actually pose a threat to the Chinese land supremacy.

³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014): pp. 29-36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵ Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): p. 82.

“Geography reinforces bipolar tendencies toward stable balancing and great power management of regional order... The geography of East Asia, by affecting great power interests and by moderating the impact of the security dilemma, offsets the tendency of bipolarity toward crises, arms races, and local wars.”⁶

These false promises that water might halt the conflict and promote peace contribute to the optimism on the low probability of war in the Indo-Pacific between China and the U.S. Nevertheless, witnessing the disappointing realities, it is hard to share their confidence. One may see a fierce, and still intensifying maritime security competition between the two great powers cut apart. To take one step further, the core argument of the paper is that such competition brings about a great danger to escalate into a naval war of unknown scale. Interestingly, this war-prone trend – still speeding up – is exactly the result of their lack of interest in maritime affairs relative to the safety on land.

In opposition to the unfounded optimism, scholars have already raised one of the reasons why a state’s insularity – its separation from other competitors via large bodies of water – encourages rather than impedes aggression. Schuessler et al. ascribe it to a “freedom to roam” and a “sterilization of power”: insular powers are less threatened at their respective backyards, and can better afford to project power abroad. In addition, they are less counterbalanced as they usually take the position as less threatening, offshore “security providers”.⁷ countries that are physically protected by water or those that are politically surrounded by non-threatening states would refrain from the pressure of either sparing large portion of military forces to deal with enemy in sight or being the target of a balancing coalition. They can hence concentrate their appetite of power maximization across the water. One may see the greatest danger of naval war between two insular countries that are both freed to expand out in the ocean.

In the specific case of the Sino-U.S. security competition, however, more research is needed to understand how war may break out in the process of the great power contest. Scholars such as Graham Allison have raised the alarm of China and the U.S. going to war, but there has not been a systematic analysis on how the naval components impact the exact likelihood.⁸ In order to approximate the possibility of a naval war, one needs to marry the geopolitics in East Asia to the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 83-97.

⁷ John M. Schuessler, et al. “Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note,” *Perspectives on Politics* (2021): pp. 4-6.

⁸ See Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), chapter 8.

nature of sea power. I examine some previous works on naval competition and aim to analyze the nature of sea power as a possible origin of conflicts. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Alfred Thayer Mahan sees the sea as “a great common” that inextricably associates with the greatness of a nation and allows a country to project its power from a distant place, taking advantage of the extent of maneuverability.⁹ “International struggles since classical times were often greatly affected by command of the sea”, Paul Kennedy comments, “conversely, a country which lost command of the sea would suffer both militarily and commercially, probably to the extent of being unable to continue the struggle.”¹⁰

Naval wars happen as a result of the competition over the command of the sea. In his *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Sir Julian Corbett conveys Mahan’s argument more clearly: “The object of naval warfare must always be directly or indirectly either to secure the command of the sea or to prevent the enemy from securing it.”¹¹ The only means to enforce such control, as noted by Jerker J. Widen in his comment on Corbett, “is the capture or destruction of sea-borne property” with naval combats.¹² Based on the disciplines derived from Mahan and Corbett’s philosophy of sea power, Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay summarizes the defining characteristic of a naval force to be its special role in projecting power, or “the capacity to influence politics in more places farther from home.”¹³

Geography and Deterrence from the Cold War Era to Present

Most studies on power transition and great power politics are west-centric and largely focused on the cases in Europe. This is not surprising, as the latest great power competition between the Soviet Union and the U.S. during the Cold War was primarily located in Europe. Although the two camps fought over spheres of influence elsewhere in the world, most hostility, tensions and preparations for war took place in the European theater. Europe is a land-dominant environment, in which the only significant waterbody was the English channel that separates Britain from the

⁹ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890), pp. 29-59.

¹⁰ Paul Kennedy, “The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power,” *The International History Review* 10, no. 1 (1988): p. 3.

¹¹ Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), p. 87.

¹² Jerker J. Widen, *Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his Contribution to Military and Naval Thought* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), p. 97.

¹³ Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, “The Influence of Sea Power on Politics: Domain and Platform-Specific Attributes of Material Capabilities,” *Security Studies* 29, no.4 (2020): pp. 601-04.

continent. There lacks oceans, mountains or terrains that were able to halt an offensive. In the Cold War, the participants were predominantly worried about a land war – mainly about “the central front”.¹⁴ The military forces of the two great powers were directly bordering each other, and there lacked any oceans, mountains or terrains that could halt an offensive and deter aggression. The risk for a major war was therefore considered high, or at least the possibility of war was sensible.

Paradoxically, the sensible possibility of war in the Cold War era was a good source of stability and deterrence. The assessment of likelihood of war usually has to do with the potency of deterrence, as war breaks out as a result when deterrence fails. Deterrence is defined as an action to discourage states from taking unwanted actions, especially military aggression, to maintain a status-quo.¹⁵ Generally, deterrence is most likely to be successful when a prospective attacker believes that the probability of success is low, and the costs of attack are high.¹⁶ Most perceivably, the effectiveness of a deterrence relies on the prospects of defending an attack, in other words, equals the balance of military power between the attacker and the defender. In the modern world, deterrence was composed of three dimensions: conventional deterrence on land, conventional deterrence at sea and the nuclear deterrent. Back in the 1980s, all three dimensions of deterrence was stable on the European central front.

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union was never a real regional hegemon in terms of its conventional military might – its land forces were not promising enough to conquer Europe in an offensive, let alone being transported across the Atlantic to threaten the U.S. mainland.¹⁷ The fighting capabilities of the two sides’ ground forces in Europe were roughly at balance. The Soviet Union, as the rising power, was also in a great disadvantage in the relative naval power and could not challenge the naval hegemony of the west, either. Meanwhile, the west also lacked the will and need to launch a sea-borne attack. In addition, the nuclear balance of the two camps was stable in most times. The conventional deterrence on land, at sea and the nuclear aspect in the process of the Cold War were all robust and capable of deterring an attack from the adversary.

The great powers of the Cold War era worried about a land war in Europe, mainly involving the central front. Asia was a secondary theater in the perspectives of both sides, and a naval

¹⁴ Patrick J. Geary, “NATO Battlefield Strategy for the Conventional Defense of Central Europe,” *University of Richmond Master’s Theses* (1987): pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (New York: SAGE Publications, 1977), pp. 26-30.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 23.

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Soviets Can’t Win Quickly in Central Europe,” *International Security* 7, no. 1 (1982): pp. 3-39.

competition in the Asia-Pacific received even less consideration. The U.S. fought two wars in Asia – one on the Korean Peninsula and another in Indochina – which were both land wars and never got to confront the Soviet Navy directly. The U.S. was in no position thinking of a naval war, except when it was attached a land war and has to do with amphibious attacks, shore bombardment or logistics shipping. The U.S. Navy was therefore an auxiliary force particularly in East Asia, due to the relative unimportance of naval warfare in the region compared to land warfare in Europe. Deterrence, in the eyes of the United States before the end of the Cold War, was all about deterring a land war. The naval deterrence was least considered because of the weakness of its rivals' navies, as well as the supportive role of naval forces at the European central front. The U.S. and its allies, since the end of the Pacific War, never seriously thought about a decisive naval battle as there existed no such threats – the U.S. Navy could not do much to enhance the conventional deterrence on land either.¹⁸

However, as has been elaborated earlier on, the geography that contains the potential for conflict today between China and the U.S. is fundamentally different from that in Europe during the Cold War or earlier. It was also different from the combat scenarios that the U.S. had expected in Asia. To imagine the possible conflicts that may arise between China and the U.S., there is a possibility of a land war – theoretically – as well as a naval war. There are probable scenarios, for a purely fictional example, when the Chinese ground forces engage U.S. reinforcements on the Taiwan island in a skirmish. Nevertheless, the land warfare is not the major concern, as neither is capable of conventionally threatening the other's homeland. Geographically, the existence of waterbodies in Asia significantly restricted the projection of land power. Militarily, China had consolidated its regional dominance on land ever since the end of the Sino-Vietnam conflicts in 1991. There stands no chance when an amphibious attack on either the Chinese or the U.S. mainland can win.

Compared to the central front during the Cold War, the problem of conventional deterrence on land has been ruled out. It is possible that China and the U.S. might get dragged into a proxy war in Korea or elsewhere, but these may not be their focus. There is no analogy to the inter-German borders in the 1980s. Within the conventional dimension, the land deterrence is playing a diminishing role as a major, decisive land war of conquest is highly improbable between China and the U.S. in the near future. Apparently, neither the U.S. nor China is taking the nuclear option a serious consideration either. Even though the Chinese nuclear armament is not as powerful as

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, "A Strategic Misstep: The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security* 11, no. 2 (1986): p. 5.

that of the Soviet Union towards the end of the Cold War, it is certainly deadly enough to ensure mutual destruction, or at least after undergoing the modernization.

Today, the only setting at which a war can practically happen between the two great powers is the sea, and the naval deterrence is relatively weak. One may observe that the disputed areas in the Indo-Pacific are mostly at sea: if shooting has to happen, it undoubtedly has to be over more or less naval-oriented contingencies. Figure 1 puts together observations on the hotspots in Asia-Pacific in which China and the U.S. are both a part of. Based on sources including the RAND reports, I examined how important naval and land factors respectively are for winning a war of medium intensity and scale. The importance of naval factors can be understood as “decisive”, for instance, when in a certain scenario the victory can be directly guaranteed once the command of the sea is secured by either side after a naval clash. The directions of deterrence point out the potential attacker and defender in each case.

As seen in the chart below, the hotspots that drew most attention are South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan, Korea and the Subcontinent (Pakistan and India). The former two fronts are almost entirely concerned with naval forces, whereas the latter ones are expected to have significant naval involvements. In all five cases, the presence of land forces has been limited, either due to the water-dominant geographic setting or because of the narrow front in Korea, Taiwan and Sino-Indian borders that greatly restricted the number of troops that can be deployed and the scale of the land war. For a reference, the Uijeongbu corridor, the area through which the two Koreas most likely choose to attack each other, has a 30-mile width at its widest point. The areas that are suitable for breakthrough is narrower along the Sino-Indian borders, given the Himalayas – hence not many ground troops are able to be accommodated in any land war scenario in which China might be a part of. To compare, the possible line of contact across Europe – “the Iron Curtain” – had a length of 5,000 miles and could hold a great number of units. Deterrence in Asia, therefore, mainly has to do with naval deterrence for geographical reasons – the ocean has been the major arena. As will be argued in the next portion, this naval deterrence is likely to fail, essentially since the two countries will have to fight at sea.

[Table on the next page]

Figure 1. Potential areas of conflicts in Asia between China and the U.S. ¹⁹

Region	Major players	Importance of naval factors	Importance of land factors	Chinese level of commitments	U.S. level of commitments	Directions and types of conventional deterrence
South China Sea	China, Vietnam, Philippines, United States	Decisive	Absent	Very high	Very high	No clear direction; naval deterrence only
East China Sea	China, Japan, South Korea, United States	Decisive	Absent	Very high	Very high	No clear direction; naval deterrence only
Taiwan	Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, United States	Decisive	Very important	Vital interest	Very high	Mainland China on offensive, U.S. and allies / partners deter; both naval and land deterrence
Korea	China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, United States	Very important	Decisive	Very high	Very high	U.S. and allies / partners on offensive, China and North Korea deter; both naval and land deterrence
Subcontinent	India, Pakistan, China, United States	Important	Very important	Medium	Medium	Unclear, conflicts take place mainly between India and Pakistan; mostly land deterrence

¹⁹ Source: James Dobbins, et al. *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), pp. 2-5.

Structural Reasoning of “the War More Imaginable”

From observations on the deterrence types in possible scenarios, in the areas where China and the U.S. put very high commitments, the naval factors nearly determine the outcome of war single-handedly, due to the limited effectiveness of land forces in each case. How countries discern sea-borne threats is fundamentally different from how they do it regarding threats on the other side of the land border, and the logic of preventing a naval war is fundamentally different from that of deterring aggressions on land. There is a serious possibility of a naval war, not only since the geography provides no alternative battleground for the dual between China and the U.S., but also because of the structural factors that make today’s Asia-Pacific a completely different topic from Europe in 1980s. These factors decide how water-rich surroundings may be – counterintuitively – more war-prone and less deterrent than previously predicted.

The security at sea, compared to the security of land territory, is a more delicate issue. Even though it is not an existential matter, the sea-borne threat proves itself to be an issue important enough to care about – maritime security is always on the next priority when the land borders are secured. For a pair of great power competitors which shares land borders or whose interests clashes on the continent – such as the U.S. and the Soviet Union in Europe – they care about the balance of land power as well as sea power, since these are the origin of conventional deterrence in respective domains. The landmass is prioritized, as the offensive capability is mostly associated with the army and its supportive forces. To deter a potential Warsaw Pact attack into West Germany, for example, the NATO invested heavily on its ground forces. However, for China and the United States, as argued, the possibility of a major war on land has been small enough for both countries to emphasize the balance of naval power, in order to deter the other side.

By reviewing the existing literatures and comments from Mahan, Corbett, Gorshkov and others, the mere presence of water does not provide safety, nor can they prevent wars from happening categorically. While waterbodies do pose an insurmountable barrier that stops great powers from invading the mainland of each other across the seas, such stopping power also plays a facilitating role when the sea is seen as a “great common”, in which warships can block trade routes, undermine the coastal defense and even remove a country from the list of great powers by annihilating its naval assets. When a country lacks the means to protect itself from the sea-borne menace, it is not directly faced with existential problems but still constitutes a very dangerous situation. Getting on such a slippery slope although does not impact the ultimate survival of the state in the short term, is an issue unacceptable to great powers and serious enough for them to gamble a naval war.

In the realist world, being harmless is synonymous with being vulnerable. In history, most of the humiliation that China suffered from the west came from the sea, as its coast was defenseless, its navy close to nonexistent in the Opium Wars. The rebuilt Beiyang fleet was again annihilated in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894.²⁰ “In the last century, the European countries have moved from India into the South Seas, and from the South Seas into China...” Prime Minister of the Qing Empire Li Hongzhang wrote in his policy memo in objection to the abolition of ship building programs in 1872, “from the West to the East and from the North to the South, the foreign all across the Earth has gathered in China – and it is really a great change unseen in 3,000 years.”²¹ 150 years later, China has borrowed the notion of “changes unseen in a hundred years” to remind itself of the humiliation it suffered as a result of a defenseless sea. It has been crystal clear that a disarmed navy invites foreign invasion and enslavement. With such a mentality in mind, it is hard to be deterred when the naval balance is once again a determinant factor to the country’s fate in the great power competition.

On another hand, it is easier to imagine fighting a naval war far away from the mainland. It is believed that, by definition, a naval war is limited to the battleground at sea, and therefore a smaller stake is involved. It does not threaten either China or the United States’ physical foundations of state survival, even in a case of decisive defeat. Even if the conflict escalates into an extent that requires the use of nuclear weapons, they will be used at sea, not on land. The competition over sea power privileges independent naval battles that do not have to do with gains and losses of territory. Naval engagements are assumed to be instant, non-collateral and much more manageable probabilities of escalation – these features make leaders more inclined to resort to force on sea than on land. It is hard to imagine a major war fought on the mainland of either the U.S. or China, given the stopping power of water, the nuclear arsenals and the nationalist sentiment; a naval campaign at South China Sea or Taiwan Strait would sound much more reasonable and practical. Considering the successful use of navy in the Russo-Japanese War, the low stake, limited nature and high yield of naval warfare makes it more preferable.

One cannot conquer with sea power, and by itself sea power is not a war-winning weapon – it is a coercing tool.²² Naval threats are perceived of a lesser problem than armies summoned at the land border, and naval defeats are considered less destructive than a defeat in a decisive land war. Losing a couple of islands, surrendering the territorial waters or getting a fleet annihilated does

²⁰ Bruce A. Elleman, *The Making of the Modern Chinese Navy : Special Historical Characteristics* (London: Anthem Press, 2019), pp. 29-34, 39-42.

²¹ 李鸿章, *李鸿章全集* (长春: 时代文艺出版社, 1998), pp. 873-79.

²² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 85-87.

not immediately announce a state to its death. When the consequences of a war are less severe, the probability of war happening becomes higher. To make matters worse, it is also structurally impossible to distinguish between offense and defense when it comes to naval warfare, as the platforms and weapon systems used in each scenario are almost identical.²³ Consequently, whenever a great power starts to build up its navy, it is automatically perceived as an offensive move and therefore raises alarm to the rival state, thus further destabilizing the security situation. To sum up, there is no threat of a national destruction in the naval dimension of great power competitions, but there is a serious threat. On the fine line stands the risk of war in areas where naval power determines “national greatness”. For geographical reasons, should a war happen in a water-rich surroundings such as East Asia, it has to take place on water. For structural reasons, the subtlety of importance of the naval component increases the likelihood of war actually breaking out.

The Russo-Japanese War as a Naval Security Competition

There lacked historical empirics by which we may deduce the manner of a naval competition. As great power politics was mainly written by the west, with most stories taking place in Europe, deterrence has traditionally been thought as an affair that has to do with land warfare. Throughout history, one of the few cases that can provide wisdom from the past is the Russo-Japanese War, which removed Russia from the list of great powers after its decisive defeat in the Battle of Tsushima – thus proving the decisiveness of naval factors in East Asian geopolitics. Revisiting the history in the Russo-Japanese War also offers useful reference to understand current dynamism and future trajectory in the Sino-U.S. competition.

The Meiji Restoration in 1868 modernized started the modernization of Japan, and in the following decades it assimilated itself with western political ideas, technological advances and ways of warfare. By the late 19th century, it had transformed into an industrial, imperialist state and began to receive recognition as equal with the western powers.²⁴ In 1895, Japan defeated China, annihilated China’s fleets and established itself as a major power in this region. Russia, which was also expanding in East Asia seeking for a warm-water port on the Pacific felt threatened and challenged by the rising Japan, which was right at the doorstep of Russian Far East. Meanwhile as

²³ For offense-defense distinguishability and its connections to proneness to war, see Charles L. Glazer, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 92.

²⁴ Richard Storry, *Japan and the Decline of the West in Asia, 1894-1943* (New York: St. Martins’ Press, 1979), pp. 15-16. Also see Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 47-50.

Japan was undergoing socio-political reforms, Russia had spread its presence through building railways, seized Port Arthur and started to expand into Korea.

Irreconcilable conflicts emerged between the two great powers. In as early as 1875, Russia had forced Japan to sign the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, and made it exchange Sakhalin for the Russia-occupied Kuril Islands. The power disequilibrium created by Japan's continued rising further undermined Russia's dominance as the first "Asiatic power".²⁵ Gradually, the two countries found overlapping spheres of influence and future ambitions in carving up multiple regions, including Korea, the Liaodong Peninsula, and the rest of Manchuria. Russia, widely accepted as a traditional, European great power, was in a far more advantageous position. In 1895 following the Japanese victory over China, Russia was supported by Germany and France to pressured Japan to relinquish control over the Liaodong Peninsula and abandon any privilege enjoyed in Manchuria. The so-known "Triple Intervention" extinguished any remaining illusions for Japan to peacefully co-exist with the status-quo power of Russia.²⁶

Japan, though unable to resist Russian superiority in the Far East and was forced to subdue, was enraged. Directed by the sense of the Russian threat, Japan acted vigorously in diplomatic efforts to contain and isolate Russia, while expanding its defense budget and building ships to counter militarily. It promulgated a ten-year naval build-up program, in hope of winning the future naval war against Russia. The campaign was under the slogan "perseverance and Determination", in which Japan commissioned 109 new warships for a total of 200,000 tons, as compared to the 50 ships it originally had. Japan's government expenditure emphasized expanding armaments and preparing for an upcoming war, surging from 84 million Yen in the fiscal year 1894 to 240 million Yen in 1897.²⁷ At the time, the Japanese government had a significantly smaller budget, as its total GNP was only 14 percent of Russia's. However, with regard to military spending, the gap between Japan and Russia was much narrower.²⁸

In the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, the main islands of Japan were in a secure condition, and there was not many overseas interest that worth the spending on naval forces. The Korean protectorate was the only offshore colony that Japan held, and it faced much more severe pressure on land rather than at sea. It was the fear of Russia exterminating Japanese naval capabilities and

²⁵ Fredrick Engels, "Russia's Success in the Far East," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 16 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), pp. 82-86.

²⁶ Yoji Koda, "The Russo-Japanese War: Primary Causes of Japanese Success," *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 2 (2005): pp. 14-16.

²⁷ 刘真武, "三国干涉还辽和日俄战争的爆发," *世界历史* 5 (1983): pp. 80-85.

²⁸ Ono Keishi, "Japan's Monetary Mobilization for War," in John Steinberg, et al., *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective*, vol. 2 (Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 252-53.

reversing Japan back to the Black Ship era that motivated Japan to invest on its navy, and ultimately challenge the Russian status-quo at sea with a naval showdown.

The Russo-Japanese war ended with a stunning Japanese victory, and many factors contributed to the Japanese winning. However, in observation of the unsuccessful stalemates on land, such as the long-standing siege of Port Arthur, one may raise a conclusion that Russia yielded primarily because of its decisive defeat on water – especially in the Battle of Tsushima commented by Corbett as “the most decisive naval battle in history”. The Japanese fleet was modeled after the Mahanian theory on the facilitative power of the water. Mahan believes that maritime nations needed fleets of capital ships capable of fighting and winning decisive battles that left the victor with command of the sea and the vanquished without the means to contest it. In order to do so, he generally advocated a structured concept, which called for the fleet to remain unified, since division diminished the ability to strike a decisive blow.²⁹

The Japanese navy directed all its combat capabilities against Russia and took advantage of the dispersed deployment of Russian naval assets. It was guided by the correct doctrine to fight the Mahanian naval war. The war started with a surprise torpedo raid on Russian ships in Port Arthur. The Japanese navy carried out a series of naval engagements that evolved into a blockade and shelling of the harbor. In the blockade and a land siege of Port Arthur, all capital ships of the First Russian Pacific Squadron were sunk, after their unsuccessful attempt to break out of the blockade.³⁰ Russia was denied access to the sea in the Far East. The Russian Baltic Fleet tried to redeploy and rescue, but it took half a year to sail across half a globe, around the Cape of Good Hope to reach the Pacific. When the reinforcement was still enroute, the remaining of the Russian naval capabilities in the Pacific was badly struck in the Battle of the Yellow Sea. This “Second Pacific Squadron”, consisted of almost all capital ships of the Russian Baltic Fleet, finally arrived at Tsushima on May 27, 1905, after a voyage of over 18,000 nautical miles. The interception of Russian reinforcement turned to the famous Battle of Tsushima, and Japan won this decisive naval battle due to a more advanced naval doctrine, better training and the Russian exhaustion.

Above all, Japan was better aware of the facilitative role of the water, and made better, more concentrated use of its naval capabilities to defeat a much stronger enemy piece by piece, in order to obtain security and expansion at sea. As Corbett comments, “... regarding it (the Russo-Japanese War) in its broadest aspect, its most conspicuous feature is admittedly that it was a war in a

²⁹ William R. Sprance, “The Russo-Japanese War: The Emergence of Japanese Imperial Power,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 6, no.3 (2004): p. 2.

³⁰ Hesibo Tikowara, et al., *Before Port Arthur in a Destroyer: The Personal Diary of a Japanese Naval Officer* (London: John Murray, 1907), pp. 12-15.

maritime theater, where naval and military operations were so intimately connected as to be inseparable.”³¹ The war was naval history's first decisive sea battle fought by modern steel battleship fleet. It reflected this immense political importance of naval balancing, through the means of a naval war that decides who leaves the great power hierarchy.

Historical empirics of the Russo-Japanese War show that naval factors have been no less importance to state survival in the long term. They might not pose an existential threat as a fight over territories may bring about, but maritime security is a concern serious enough to make great powers fearful of its adversary's naval developments and tempted to eliminate the threat with a naval war. Based on the historical evidence, a defeat in a naval war and a losing naval advantage may not physically exterminate a country as land invasions could sometimes, but it can well remove it from the great power status – which is equally unacceptable to great powers and encourage them to actively engage each other in the oceans.

The Sino-U.S. Naval Competition and the Naval Deterrence Bound to Fail

China and the United States are encountering the exact same trajectory as Japan and Russia faced in early 1900s. Akin to the Russo-Japanese relations, the Sino-U.S. relations have been undergoing turmoils for the past decades, and there is a clear trend of deterioration. According to a study carried out by Tsinghua University, the index of Sino-U.S. relations has fallen to the lowest point since 1971, when the two countries made their first diplomatic contact.³² Like in the Russo-Japanese case, the deterioration has undertaken a process and the current hostility is no accident. A series of events have marked the downslope after 1989, including the 1993 U.S. hijacking of a Chinese cargo ship, the 1994 Yellow Sea Incident, the 1996 U.S. intervention in the Taiwan Strait missile crisis, the 1999 NATO bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the 2003 collision between a Chinese J-8 II interceptor and a U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance plane, etc.³³ More recently, the disagreements, disputes and even confrontations between the two countries on water have been much more intense and frequent. China in most of times has been backing off, due to the relatively inferior military capabilities – a situation similar to Japan's concessions until the Triple Intervention.

³¹ Julian S. Corbett, *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2015), vol. 2, p. 382.

³² Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University, “THU Scores between the United States and China” in *Bilateral Relations Data*, published online December 2021. <http://www.tuiir.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/1145/5668.htm>.

³³ Michael S. Chase, et al. “Chinese Perceptions of and Responses to US Conventional Military Power,” *Asian Security* 14, no. 2 (2017): p. 141.

Naval deterrence has been an emphasis for strategic planning in both China and the United States. After Obama announced the initiative to “pivot to Asia”, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons” (JAM-GC, previously known as the Air-Sea Battle doctrine) in 2016.³⁴ This initiative aims to “inform joint force operations so that the U.S. can maintain access to and maneuver through the global commons, project power, and defeat an adversary attempting to deny freedom of action to U.S. and allied forces.”³⁵ It claims to “offset the PLA’s unprovoked and unwarranted military buildup... maintain an ability to deter China from acts of aggression or coercion in the region and, if necessary, respond effectively in the event deterrence fails.”³⁶

Interestingly, the JAM-GC pictures an attempt to preserve the U.S. capability of access, that is, to deter the decade-long Chinese effort of deterring U.S. from entering its backyard – famously named as the “Anti-Access/Area Denial” (A2/AD) program. As will be discussed later, this countermove had been outdated as soon as it came out – today’s China is close to abandon the stopgap measure of the A2/AD, a purely defensive stance which it had to adapt given the gap in sea power. By its literal sense, the A2/AD is a defensive concept that aims to prevent an adversary from traversing an area. With the capability to inflict heavy damage on the intruder, it serves a main function to dissuade a U.S. naval intervention. In the simplest terms, the A2/AD – regardless of the fancy name – is just a form of conventional deterrence, albeit designed to deter a naval aggression from the U.S. in most times.

In the past decades, the history of the Sino-U.S. maritime competition had been a competition between deterrence and power projection at sea. China was well aware that the U.S. would come to, say, Taiwan’s rescue should a war break out, and to deter the U.S. naval forces from entering the region became the top priority. Reversely, in the times when the gap of naval capabilities was huge, China itself had been effectively deterred and was not able to expand at sea. Eugene Gholz et al. point out that, in general, China’s operational concept based on A2/AD is “primarily defensive and ill-suited to offensive goals,” and that “distance imposes the biggest limit on A2/AD capability.”³⁷

³⁴ Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” *The Brookings Institution*, published online December 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

³⁵ Michael E. Hutchens, et al., “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A New Joint Operational Concept,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2017): p. 135.

³⁶ Jan van Tol, et al. *Air Sea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), p. 10.

³⁷ Eugene Gholz, et al., “Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect U.S. Allies in Asia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019): p. 177.

The mutual naval deterrence turned out to be successful at the A2/AD era, since China stood no chance winning an offensive operation in Taiwan, South China Sea or Diaoyu Islands. However, after China declares its ambitions of a “blue water navy” and starts the rapid naval buildup, the naval power gap shrinks fast, distance is less a problem, offensive use of naval forces becomes an option, and there no longer exists such a stable deterrence. By now, it is already clear that China is on the potential offensive and that the U.S. is in the position to deter.

As the main argument in the article, the naval deterrence in East Asia is predestined to fail in the future as the power dynamics continue to shift in China’s favor. A naval war is more than likely to happen in the process of this specific case of great power competition. To generalize, a deterrence usually takes the form of “if you... I will...”; it is a threat, and the cost-benefit analysis from the attacker’s perspective has to do with the credibility of threat, the costs when threatened measures are carried out, the probability of accomplishing the attack and the benefits of the attack. According to Charles Glazer, rational deterrence theory holds that an attacker will be deterred if:

Probability of deterrer carrying out deterrent threat × Costs if threat carried out > Probability of the attacker accomplishing the action × Benefits of the action.

To simplify, deterrence is effective when $Costs \times P(Costs) > Benefits \times P(Benefits)$.³⁸

From the equation, we see that a deterrence is most likely to fail when at least one of the following happens, *ceteris paribus*: 1) Costs incurred by deterrence failure become lower; 2) Credibility of the deterrent threat become lower; 3) The attacker becomes more capable of achieving its offensive goals; 4) The benefits of winning the offensive become higher. In the water-rich East Asia with a determining naval component, three out of the four changes listed above have been observed as the Sino-U.S. naval competition intensifies. As argued before, naval wars involve a smaller cost overall. The U.S. commitment to extend deterrence over the unpopulated Diaoyu Islands or a couple of shoals in South China Sea also sounds less convincing. China undoubtedly has increased its prospects of winning the offensive, as its navy has become much stronger in both absolute and relative terms.

As Michael Auslin correctly puts it, “Washington confronts the difficulty of dealing with a ‘near-peer’ competitor whose goals are increasingly antithetical to its own.”³⁹ The military buildup of the Chinese Navy and its expansion have toppled the fragile naval balance between

³⁸ Charles L. Glazer, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 20.

³⁹ Michael R. Auslin, *Asia’s New Geopolitics: Essays on Reshaping the Indo-Pacific* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2020), p. 174.

China and the U.S. This is what ought to happen, as any great power would pursue further power maximization at sea when its landmass is secured. For a rising power, it is realized through challenging the naval status-quo of the hegemon. As time goes by, the U.S. will find China an increasingly aggressive naval power and increasingly difficult to deter. By the time the naval deterrence fails, the U.S. is faced with two choices, either to concede the naval hegemony in Asia-Pacific to China or to actually carry out the deterrent threat and engage in a preventive naval war. In short, the naval deterrence today in East Asia is likely to fail, and a naval war is likely to break out between China and the United States.

Conclusion

This thesis responds to the false belief that the rich presence of waterbodies in East Asia deters aggression and contributes to prevention a war from happening between China and the U.S. On the contrary, I argue that the special water-rich geographical setting facilitates aggression and makes a war more likely to happen. I compare the case in the Sino-U.S. naval security competition to that during the Cold War on the European central front, and come to an observation that conventional deterrence is more robust in 1980's Europe than in today's Asia-Pacific. When the possibilities of a land war is significantly limited, countries find a naval war more "imaginable" and "acceptable", as it does not involve the gain and loss of territory, and has a smaller danger of nuclear escalation. The thesis explains that whereas geographical reasons make a most likely take place at sea should it really happen, this very limited nature of naval wars contributes to the overall weakness of naval deterrence. When naval war becomes the only imaginable option of warfare, there is a much greater possibility that a security competition may evolve into a war.

It is predicted that China will eventually abandon its A2/AD strategic concept – which is largely about passive close-water defense within the range of land-based fire support – and show a clear, active stance in multiple maritime directions including Taiwan, South China Sea and East China Sea. According to Glazer's model of deterrence effectiveness, the increase in its capability of winning the offensive as well as the smaller costs and possibility of being deterred will make China's naval expansion very difficult to be contained. Except when the U.S. is willing to accept the loss of its global naval hegemony, a naval war is likely to break out. With reference to the historical evidence in the Russo-Japanese War, this naval war may determine the fate of the competition once and for all. Therefore, the current academia is dangerously mistreating the great power contest between China and the U.S., due to the misunderstanding of the facilitating effect of the naval component.

Appendix: A Map of China and Waterbodies in East Asia



Source: 中华人民共和国自然资源部标准地图服务系统, <http://bzdt.ch.mnr.gov.cn>

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