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STRATEGIC FEATURES OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

A Tough Neighborhood for Hegemons

James R. Holmes

The South China Sea is a semienclosed sea at the intersection between East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. It exhibits characteristics similar to the Mediterranean Sea and the Caribbean Sea, as well as some revealing differences. Both the similarities and the differences commend sea-power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan's analysis of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to present-day students and practitioners of maritime strategy. Mahan classified strategic features—especially prospective sites for naval stations—by their positions, strengths, and resources. This article adds a metric to his analytical template, namely, the state of relations with countries that host naval bases. He applied much the same framework to narrow seas, such as international straits, while also sizing up these passages' widths, lengths, and difficulty of transit. Here too an element warrants adding, namely, the underwater terrain—its topography and hydrography.

This modified template allows for exhaustive analysis of geostrategic features. Mahanian methods retain their potency not just for evaluating enclosed seas and adjacent littorals but also for assessing the value of maritime strategic features

wherever they may be found. This article investigates Mahan's methodology; applies it to maritime Southeast Asia, examining the sea and its islands, the South China Sea rim, ingress and egress points, the capacity of local sea powers, the underwater dimension, and crucial differences separating the South China Sea from other marginal seas;

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and urges those who do business in great waters to embrace this instrument for general use.

WHY THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

What would Mahan think about the strategic geography of the South China Sea? One thing is certain—that he *would* think about it were he alive today. How could he not? Journalist Robert Kaplan calls the South China Sea “the 21st century’s defining battleground,” the “throat of global sea routes.”¹ China seemingly covets a hegemonic position there, having repeatedly asserted “indisputable sovereignty” over virtually the entire expanse while conducting itself as though it intends to create a closed sea.² And it is moving to match purpose with power, constructing a great navy, deploying its first unified coast guard, and providing fire support for the sea services through such shore-based sea-denial weaponry as antiship cruise and ballistic missiles and missile-armed tactical aircraft, submarines, and patrol craft.

Beijing’s claims to sovereignty over this vast realm are far from indisputable. But—backed up by this panoply of military hardware and the advantages that accrue to those defending their home turf—they might prove irresistible. China’s naval rise is a crucial factor prompting the United States to “pivot” or “rebalance” to the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. As early as 2007, U.S. sea-service chiefs pledged to stage “credible combat power” in the two oceans for the foreseeable future.³

Geopolitical thinkers explain why. The South China Sea belongs to what Yale professor Nicholas Spykman terms the “girdle of marginal seas” swaddling the Eurasian mainland. For Spykman, dominating such marginal seas is crucial to projecting power into the Eurasian rimlands and thence into the vast interior. As Kaplan notes, this potentially contested body of water is also an interface joining the two oceans constituting the “Indo-Pacific” region.⁴ Seagoing forces routinely traverse it, alighting around the Asian perimeter as strategic circumstances warrant. Strategic mobility would be slower and clumsier absent free transit through Southeast Asian waters. Freedom of the seas constitutes a mainstay of U.S. foreign policy in any event, but it is increasingly a matter of operational expediency as well.

Maritime strategy is not all about great powers, however. Lesser Southeast Asian states seek to advance their interests, consonant with the meager physical strength they can muster. They can also reach out for support, aggregating their strength to counterbalance China. The United States is a balancer of first resort. Asian powers like Japan, India, and Australia, furthermore, have voiced interest in free passage through regional seaways, while consulting among themselves about maritime matters. The increasingly obvious intersection between Southeast Asian geography and politics would fix Mahan’s strategic eye on the

region—much as he peered southward toward the Caribbean and Gulf during his own lifetime.

THROUGH A MAHANIAN LOOKING GLASS

By consulting Mahan's works on American geopolitics, observers can glean some idea of what he would say about strategic competition in Southeast Asia were he alive today. That naval historian compared the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico to the Mediterranean Sea in hopes of deriving insights into strategic effectiveness in semienclosed expanses. He saw "a very marked analogy in many respects" between the Mediterranean and Caribbean Seas—"an analogy which will be still closer if a Panama canal-route ever be completed," allowing east-west transit and shortening communications between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by thousands of miles.⁵

The logic Mahan articulated for America's Mediterranean holds for any aspiring sea power that possesses the economic vitality, military strength, and political resolve—the lineaments of great power—to make use of important strategic features in or adjoining the South China Sea.⁶ Even small marine states can deploy artful strategy to deny geographic assets to stronger rivals or to exploit these assets themselves. Indeed, strategic guile is all the more important for the weak.

An expansive view of such matters came naturally to Mahan, a philosopher of sea power as well as a naval strategist.⁷ Nowadays it is distressingly commonplace for strategists to reduce him to a propagandist, a Gilbert-and-Sullivan-esque figure touting Trafalgar-like battles between swarms of armored dreadnoughts.⁸ Decisive sea battle was a part of his writings, to be sure, but not the whole—and arguably not even the most important part. For him, vouchsafes historian William Livezey, "sea power was the sum total of forces and factors, tools and geographical circumstances, which operated to gain command of the sea, to secure its use for oneself and to deny that use to the enemy."⁹ Quite so. There is more to sea power than tactics or specific implements of sea combat.

Rather, Mahan conceived of sea power as a symbiosis among domestic industry and foreign trade and commerce, commercial and naval shipping, and forward bases to support the journeys of fuel-thirsty steamships.¹⁰ "Commercial value," he wrote, "cannot be separated from military in sea strategy, for the greatest interest of the sea is commerce."¹¹ In today's parlance, gaining and enforcing commercial, political, and military "access" to regions like East Asia constituted his paramount goal. The "starting point and foundation" for comprehending sea power are "the necessity to secure commerce, by political measures conducive to military, or naval strength. This order is that of actual relative importance to the nation of the three elements—commercial, political, military."¹² Commercial access, then, held pride of place in his thinking. This is a vision of grand-strategic sweep.

Mahan was acutely conscious of geography. He examined specific theaters more attentively than did the other greats of strategic theory, except perhaps his “best military friend,” land-power scribe Antoine-Henri Jomini.¹³ Indeed, some pundits pronounce Mahan a seafaring Baron Jomini.¹⁴ Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, for instance, pay considerable attention to terrain only in a generic way. Neither goes into detail about the geographic characteristics of any particular battleground or theater.

For Mahan, studying the particular geographic surroundings is a prerequisite for competitive enterprises. He proclaims that “geography underlies strategy.”¹⁵ Many principles of continental warfare map to the sea, moreover, applying there much as they do ashore. This renders the feats of land-power giants like Frederick the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte worthy objects of study, even for mariners. Mahan delights in quoting or paraphrasing Napoleon’s maxim that “war is a business of positions.” He does so four times in *Naval Strategy* (1911), his last major work—a work specifically meant to tease out the likenesses between land and sea warfare.

So geographic analysis comes first, at sea as on land. When pondering the opening of an oceanic theater, affirms Mahan, makers of strategy must begin by surveying its physical characteristics. To design and prosecute strategy, they must evaluate geographic features, determine which are critical and which secondary, and integrate important features into their plans along with maritime forces able to shape events. “In considering any theater of actual or possible war, or of a prospective battlefield,” he insists, “the first and most essential thing is to determine what position, or chain of positions, by their natural and inherent advantages affect control of the greatest part of it.”¹⁶ Where to station forces to assert—or deny—control of key positions constitutes “a matter of prime importance” for any power that covets access to faraway expanses.¹⁷

Geography constitutes the fixed setting within which maritime strategy—a dynamic, intensely interactive human enterprise—unfolds. Yet Mahan went beyond general entreaties to afford geography its due. During his long publishing career, he constructed a framework for analyzing the worth of such strategic features as seaports, islands, and narrow waterways. His first book explored *The Gulf and Inland Waters* (1883).¹⁸ He returned to this subject in “The Strategic Features of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea,” a *Harper’s* essay reprinted in *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (1897).¹⁹ *Naval Strategy*, as suggested above, concentrates single-mindedly on unearthing points of similarity and difference between continental and maritime warfare.

Interestingly, his most influential work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, contains the *least* geographic content, beyond the general axiom that the extent and conformation of territory are two of the six inescapable

determinants of maritime might. That few readers venture beyond *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* may help explain strategists' habit of overlooking the geopolitical dimension of his writings.

Where do likely theaters of competition and conflict lie? Mahan casts this question in terms of purpose and power. He observes that certain regions, "rich by nature and important both commercially and politically, but politically insecure, compel the attention and excite the jealousies of more powerful nations."²⁰ Regions combining abundant natural resources and vibrant trade and commerce with frail governments unable to resist great-power encroachment beguile acquisitive foreign powers. Ambitious outsiders see great reward in obtaining military and economic beachheads in such regions, and they see the barriers to entry as low. Mahan was thinking of the great-power struggle over Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula. Northeast Asia was a crucible of conflict during the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and Japan's annexation of Korea (1910), great events that transpired during his lifetime.

How did Mahan estimate the strategic value of geographic positions? As noted before, he considered overseas naval stations to be collectively one of three pillars of sea power. External powers, he held, must be choosy about the sites they select, lest they disperse forces too thinly and expose their navies to piecemeal defeat in wartime. Mahan proposed that "the strategic value of any position, be it body of land large or small, or a seaport, or a strait, depends, 1, upon situation (with reference chiefly to communications), 2, upon its strength (inherent or acquired), and, 3, upon its resources (natural or stored)."²¹ As noted at the outset of this article, relations with prospective host governments constitute a de facto fourth determinant, or enabler, of a site's value. Absent decent working relations, a port will remain off-limits, along with its geostrategic leverage.

Suitably amended, Mahan's simple construct retains its analytical power today. Consider its elements in turn. First, in maritime strategy as in real estate, location ranks atop the priorities list. To be worth occupying, prospective bases must lie along "strategic lines." Otherwise, innate strength and resources matter little. Harbors near heavily trafficked sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are ideal, placing the fleet close to its sphere of action. Proximity to friendly seaports is another advantage. It allows fleet detachments to combine for defensive or offensive action in wartime, rendering mutual support. Proximity to hostile naval stations allows squadrons to watch or interdict enemy movements.

Isolation, on the other hand, detracts from a position's value. Even Gibraltar would be worthless as a naval station, despite its unsurpassed natural defenses, if situated alongside waters devoid of merchant and naval traffic.²² A fleet based there would find little to do. Nor would anyone see any point in attacking the harbor. Stout defenses would be moot. Nor can a sea power do much about

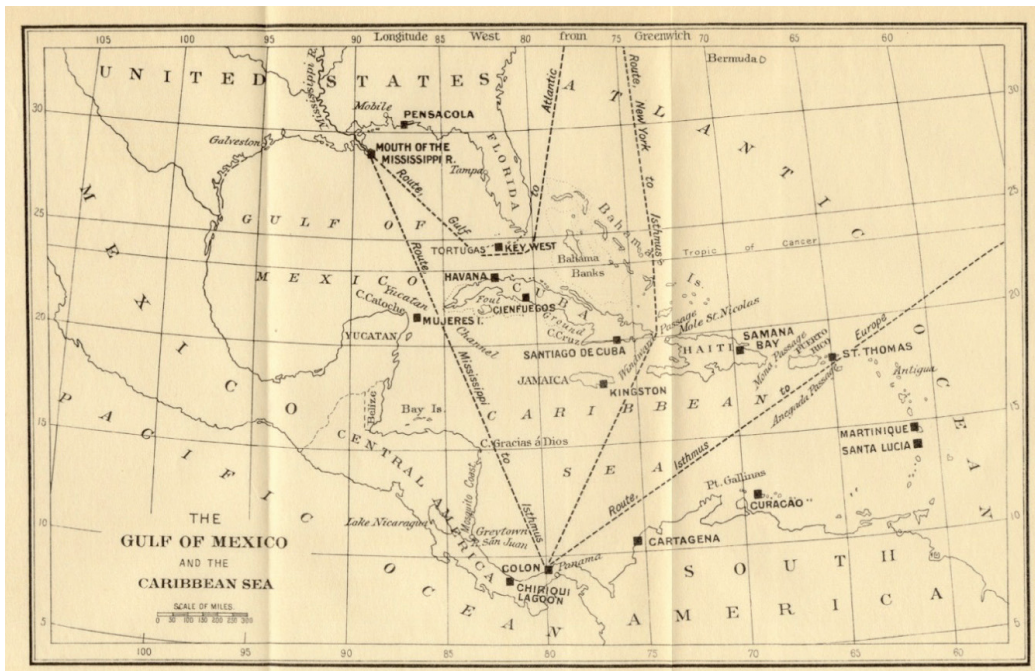
ill-positioned features. “Strength and resources,” observes Mahan, “may be artificially supplied or increased, but it passes the power of man to move a port which lies outside the limits of strategic effect.”²³ Natural defenses can be augmented to a degree, or resources can be shipped in overland or overseas. Position is eternal.

Second, a seaport needs military strength, or defensibility, to fend off maritime or landward assault while projecting naval force outward. A squadron stationed at a base capable of protecting itself can prowl the seas independently, executing its missions confident that its landward refuge will be there when it returns. Rugged natural defenses are desirable. Cliffs overlooking seaward approaches, for instance, render amphibious assault unpalatable while letting defenders rain gunfire on an enemy fleet. Defenders can emplace guns on both sides of a narrow harbor mouth, creating overlapping fields of fire. Hence Lord Nelson’s quip that a ship’s a fool to fight a fort. If a base lacks inherent protection against attack, naval engineers must fortify it—or look elsewhere for a more defensible site. Defensibility is especially complex in this age of missile warfare. Hardening infrastructure against missile strikes from the sea demands expensive, labor-intensive measures. The proliferation of inexpensive antiship weaponry, on the other hand, can augment the striking power of bases. Truck-launched antiship missiles, furthermore, can be positioned along the coast or well inland, converting the littoral zone into a *de facto* fortress.²⁴ How the offense-defense balance is likely to play out is a question worth asking when appraising a seaport’s defensibility.

Third, “resources” refers to shipyards to refit merchantmen and ships of war, provisions for visiting ships, and goods to supply the residents of the port. Foodstuffs, fuel, spare parts, and ammunition are only some of the items a base needs. Self-supporting ports are ideal. Large islands and coastal harbors boasting ample backcountry can provide for many of their needs. Sites without such endowments must ship in cargoes of critical goods. Dependence on external supplies exposes the port and fleet to a naval quarantine. Observes Mahan, resource-poor Gibraltar would wilt without seaborne supplies—its peerless strategic position and defenses notwithstanding.²⁵ Its relationship with the Royal Navy was symbiotic: warships based there could control access to the Mediterranean Sea, but ship crews and the inhabitants of the fortress would starve unless the fleet ruled the waves, assuring regular shipments.

Transpose this analysis to the Caribbean and Gulf. (Use map 1 as a reference during the following discussion.) Mahan warns against gauging a site’s potential in isolation from its surroundings. This is especially true within the cramped confines of “America’s Mediterranean.” Islands, he notes, constitute a nearly solid barrier between the Gulf and Caribbean. Cuba, Santo Domingo (i.e., Hispaniola), and Puerto Rico are the primary obstacles. Narrow seas separating the islands corral shipping bound to or from the Isthmus of Panama into three principal

MAP 1 GULF OF MEXICO AND CARIBBEAN SEA



Source: Mahan, *Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*, p. 270.

shipping lanes. One, through the Yucatán Channel, passes to Cuba's west. The second route, the Windward Passage, lies between the eastern tip of Cuba and Haiti. Because Cuba faces these two waterways (the third passes well to the south, skirting past Puerto Rico), concludes Mahan, it is "as surely the key to the Gulf of Mexico as Gibraltar is to the Mediterranean."²⁶

But as he notes, Cuba commands manifold advantages over Gibraltar in terms of strength and resources. Its attributes include a long, distended shape, multiple harbors, and abundant indigenous resources. Defenders operating in the interior could resupply harbors like Havana and Santiago overland, defying even an overpowering blockade fleet. Best of all from a Mahanian standpoint, the United States had won basing rights at Guantánamo Bay, near Cuba's eastern tip, through its victory in the Spanish-American War (1898). U.S. Navy forces stationed there stood athwart sea communications with the British-held island of Jamaica to the south. This positional advantage over the Royal Navy was no small thing, since the Royal Navy had ruled American waters until around the turn of the century and Anglo-American war remained a hypothetical possibility.

Puerto Rico, another prize wrung from Spain, likewise occupied a strategic position. As noted before, the third of Mahan's major SLOCs, the Anegada Passage, lay to its east.²⁷ U.S. Navy warships operating from the island had the option

of interdicting adversary shipping along this route or safeguarding the island and adjacent waters for friendly use. In short, its post-1898 island holdings empowered the United States to mount a forward defense of its Gulf coast, entrenched U.S. naval forces in a central position astride important shipping lanes, and granted Washington the option of radiating power southward toward the isthmus.

Amassing the wherewithal to mold events on and around the isthmus obsessed navalists like Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge. After all, an entirely new sea passage would connect Atlantic with Pacific once engineers finished digging the canal across Panama. Transoceanic passage would spare ships the long cruise around Cape Horn. In geospatial terms, observes Spykman, the “cut through Central America had the effect of turning the whole of the United States around on its axis and giving it direct access to the Pacific Ocean.” In effect, the artificial waterway teleported New York nearer to the Asia-Pacific, closer than Liverpool is to Shanghai, an invaluable edge for American merchantmen. New York was also thousands of sea miles closer to the west coast of North America.²⁸

Controlling Central American waters, consequently, became a goal of surpassing importance for Washington during the age of Mahan. Where should the U.S. Navy position forces to command these waters? The interdependence among such sites as Pensacola, Key West, and Guantánamo Bay complicated geostrategic calculations. Some sites, writes Mahan, were “overshadowed by others so near and so strong as practically to embrace them.”²⁹

When weighing the comparative merits of Jamaica and Cuba, for instance, he pointed out that Jamaica “flanks all lines of communications.” Judged purely by its geographic position, the British-held island commanded the greatest potential of any geostrategic asset in the Caribbean Sea. Yet it was deficient in resources and thus dependent on shipments brought in by sea from Canada or the British Isles. Cuba overshadowed Jamaica, controlling all sea communications between the Atlantic Ocean and the lesser island. Only a fleet stronger than any hostile fleet based in Cuba could prevent a distant blockade from isolating and slowly starving out Jamaica. Only a dominant navy could imbue Jamaica with the full value it commanded in abstract calculations, whereas Cuba was virtually self-sufficient.³⁰ By the turn of the century, the Royal Navy could outmatch the U.S. Navy in American waters only by pulling squadrons from other important theaters. Advantage: Washington.

Mahan expands in *Naval Strategy* on his position/strength/resources template, applying it to straits and other confined waterways as well as to islands and coastal sites. He also adds three metrics peculiar to narrow seas. “The military importance of such passages or defiles,” he says, “depends not only upon the geographical position, but also upon their width, length, and difficulty.” More specifically, a strait is a “strategic point” whose value depends on its “situation”

on the nautical chart; on its “strength, which may be defined to consist in the obstacles it puts in the way of an assailant and the consequent advantages to the holder”; and on “resources or advantages, such as the facility it gives the possessor for reaching a certain point.” A well-placed passage shortens the distance from place to place for the belligerent who holds it.³¹ Denying an enemy fleet passage forces it to follow longer, more circuitous, and probably more debilitating and costly routes to its destination.

As in his analysis of bases, Mahan cautions against evaluating narrow seas without accounting for their larger geographic contexts. When “fixing the value of any passage,” it is crucial to calculate the number and availability of nearby alternatives. “If so situated that a long circuit is imposed upon the belligerent who is deprived of its use, its value is enhanced.” Scarcity magnifies a waterway’s importance. Its value rises if it constitutes “the only close link between two bodies of water, or two naval stations.” Finally, he urges strategists to consider the underwater topography of narrow seas. There is a vertical dimension to Mahan’s analysis, then, even though he was concerned mainly with surface shipping. The presence of convoluted channels, shallow water, or shoal water helps determine a passage’s offensive and defensive potentials.³² A hard-to-navigate passage represents an asset to the defender, a bane to opponents unfamiliar with its intricacies and quirks.

Finally, Mahan notes in passing that “a certain regard must be had to political conditions, which may be said to a great extent to neutralize some positions.” Social or political upheaval in the surrounding country, for example, can work against or even negate a site’s value, undercutting its defensibility or impoverishing even a wealth of resources. Mahan dismissed Haiti as a base for just that reason. The country’s constant revolutionary upheaval, or sociopolitical “nothingness,” rendered it “an inert obstacle” to U.S. maritime strategy.³³

Such comments about social, cultural, and political context have the feel of an afterthought for Mahan. Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that there are diplomatic indexes of geostrategic merit. Position, strength, and resources are not everything for a base. Learning the cultural terrain can be just as crucial. Alliance relations, then, belong in the Mahanian framework as an additional metric. Today, strong nations no longer wrest choice pieces of territory from their owners to use as bases. It is imperative, consequently, to take account of prospective host nations’ interests and views—lest their governments restrict or refuse access in stressful times.

The best-situated, most defensible, most lavishly supplied seaport in the world means little if it remains off-limits when needed most. Alliance management represents an enabler for any forward-leaning maritime strategy, letting a seagoing state tap bases’ physical potential.

MAP 2 SOUTHEAST ASIA



Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, www.cia.gov/.

OPEN RANGE

Now apply this framework—position, strength, resources, and alliance relations for land sites, while adding length, width, difficulty, and underwater topography for narrow seas—to the South China Sea. (Refer to map 2.) This is a body of water similar in crucial respects to the Caribbean and Gulf, just as those semienclosed seas bore enough resemblance to the Mediterranean Sea to make Mahan's comparative study worthwhile.

The South China Sea presents operational surroundings that appear more hospitable for navies than do other semienclosed expanses of comparable size, yet are less hospitable in other respects. It is wider and more vacant than the Mediterranean or the combined Gulf and Caribbean, facilitating free passage for commercial and naval shipping while allowing naval task forces ample maneuvering space. No obstacles comparable to the Italian Peninsula jut into it to constrict navigation. No island barrier comparable to the Cuba–Hispaniola–Puerto Rico line funnels shipping bound for the Malacca Strait—the main outlet to the Indian Ocean beyond—through a few focal points that can be guarded by watchful maritime forces (or bedeviled by pirates or other nonstate scourges).

For ships that are simply passing through the region in peacetime, then, the South China Sea is a readily navigable expanse. Only a handful of mostly tiny islands, atolls, and reefs—the Spratly Islands to the south, the Paracel Islands to the north—break up the largely featureless maritime plain that separates Vietnam from the Philippines along the east–west axis and Hong Kong from Borneo from north to south. The Spratlys and Paracels command enviable geographic positions, but they feature next to nothing in terms of the benchmarks of strength and resources. Many are uninhabited, habitable only if outside supplies are brought in. At most these small, resource-impoverished, hard-to-defend islets could play host to small units armed with antiship cruise missiles, providing the force that occupies them a sea-denial option vis-à-vis passing merchant or naval traffic. These are tenuous positions for military forces in search of forward bases.

In short, it will prove hard for any Southeast Asian naval power to ensconce itself in a central position comparable to the one the United States occupied after wresting away Spain's island empire. There is no Puerto Rico, let alone a Cuba. Two islands figure prominently in news dispatches from Southeast Asia. The first is Taiping Island, the largest of the Spratlys. This asset is held by Taiwan. The second is Woody Island, or Yongxing Island, a Chinese-held outpost in the Paracels. Beijing recently instituted the administrative center of Sansha, on Yongxing, to buttress its claim to sovereignty over most of the South China Sea. Both islands resemble Jamaica, as Mahan described it, but they lack Jamaica's resource base. Both hold good positions, then, but are short on strength and resources. Neither is a self-sufficient, readily defensible Cuba.

Consider. Taiping is the largest of the Spratly Islands, at 1.4 kilometers long and 0.4 wide. These are flyspeck proportions. It is the only one of the Spratlys with its own freshwater. It is big enough for an airfield. Accordingly, Taipei has equipped the island with an airstrip capable of handling military aircraft and is mulling extending the runway to permit larger aircraft to land.³⁴ In terms of position, Taiping is well situated along SLOCs connecting the Strait of Malacca with Northeast Asia. Beyond that, it makes a precarious base. Plentiful freshwater is a significant asset,

but ships or aircraft would have to ferry in foodstuffs, ammunition, and other supplies from Taiwan, through potentially contested sea or air routes, to support any serious expeditionary presence in the South China Sea.

Without sea control or air supremacy—operational conditions increasingly out of reach for Taiwan's outmatched air force and navy—Taiping Island will fall in any serious conflict.³⁵ As in the case of Jamaica, only a dominant naval and air force can impart value to the island. Taiping would be an asset to *Chinese* sea power in Southeast Asia, since People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces can hope to rule the seas and skies, but it does little for Taiwan in military terms. The same is even truer for the other, even weaker claimants to the Spratlys.³⁶ At most the island holds negative value for Taipei—that is, withholding it from China works in favor of China's competitors, simply because it keeps the PLA from emplacing forces there in peacetime.

Woody Island, which anchors China's presence in the Paracels, holds still less intrinsic military value. As noted before, Beijing founded the city of Sansha there in July 2012 while announcing plans to garrison the island.³⁷ Like Taiping, Woody Island occupies an excellent geographic position. Also like Taiping, it is woefully deficient in strength and resources. It is minuscule. It boasts no freshwater, meaning the very basics of life must be shipped in from the mainland. Sansha is little more than a village, populated by a thousand or so residents. The garrison will be a token force, with more symbolic power than combat potential.

Even so, Chinese military predominance in the northern reaches of the South China Sea bestows more potential on Woody Island than Taiping will ever enjoy under Taiwanese control. Its capacity to sustain air and sea communications lets the PLA unlock whatever potential the island holds. In Mahanian parlance, it equates to a Jamaica that is home to a preponderant fleet and depends on that fleet for defense and sustenance. Clearly, from a military standpoint, the South China Sea islands are an unpromising lot. Yet China is best positioned to take advantage of what little they offer.

The South China Sea Rim: Part Solid, Part Porous

If not island strongholds, what about ports and airfields around the South China Sea rim? As detailed before, no sea power can easily mount a forward presence in the islands. There is no Cuba, Puerto Rico, or Saint Thomas from which to stage forward operations. Nor are there counterparts to Gibraltar, Malta, or other Mediterranean outposts where Royal Navy ships tarried during Britain's imperial heyday. Hainan Island extends China's seaward reach, but only by some 233 kilometers from the mainland coast. Converting Woody Island into a serious asset might be worth China's while but promises to consume significant resources and policy energy.

Because of these shortcomings, sites around the periphery take on more importance than in Mahan's Gulf and Caribbean. Southeast Asian states are increasingly willing to open their facilities to outsiders. Manila, for instance, has welcomed U.S. ship visits in increasing numbers since China occupied Scarborough Shoal, an atoll deep within the Philippine exclusive economic zone, in 2012. Cam Ranh Bay, a U.S.-built seaport in southern Vietnam, offers an excellent harbor astride the eastern approaches to the Strait of Malacca. Hanoi has opened the port to shipping from all nations.³⁸ Changi, a port facility in Singapore, can berth U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, not to mention smaller craft. Singapore recently agreed to host a rotating four-ship squadron of U.S. Navy littoral combat ships, while making it known that all navies are welcome to call there.³⁹ The first littoral combat ship commenced its maiden deployment in early 2013.

Neither Vietnam nor Singapore is likely to permit full-fledged foreign bases on its territory, but both appear amenable to less formal arrangements. How governments size up the strategic setting represents the crucial determinant of their policies toward foreign navies. The more aggressively China pushes its maritime territorial claims in Southeast Asia, in other words, the more receptive regional governments are likely to be to hosting outside forces. Position, strength, and resources are meaningless without access. Access is a function of international politics and, in turn, of whether governments perceive menace in the geostrategic environment and seek outside support.

There being few permanent basing options in the southern reaches of the South China Sea, ships capable of at-sea replenishment—indispensable to sustained operations on the high seas—will be central to any maritime competition. This helps account for Beijing's determined pursuit of aircraft carriers, the best mobile substitute for forward airfields. One suspects the People's Liberation Army will also step up efforts to field tanker aircraft and combat-logistics vessels. Doing so will help combat platforms remain on scene in or over southern waters, rendering the Chinese presence there less sporadic than was once the case. The PLA Navy, moreover, has fielded Type 056 corvettes to help establish a standing presence in disputed expanses. Such platforms will supplement the white hulls of the China Coast Guard. In short, material capabilities must compensate for the dearth of forward positions in the region.

Ingress and Egress Points

What about access to and from maritime Southeast Asia? The frontiers of the South China Sea bear closer resemblance to the frontiers of the Gulf and Caribbean than to those of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is a true middle sea, enclosed entirely by continental landmasses, apart from the Strait of Gibraltar, the Dardanelles and Bosphorus, and the Suez Canal, an artificial waterway. The

South China Sea, similarly, is ringed by continental Southeast Asia, a solid barrier to the north and west. Island states, however, form its eastern and southern periphery. This massive arc sweeps from the Taiwan Strait to the Strait of Malacca, passing through Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and the Indonesian Archipelago along the way. The South China Sea's eastern borders, then, are far more permeable than any found in the Mediterranean, albeit less so than the Lesser Antilles, which make up the southeastern arc of the Caribbean Sea.

In contrast to the case with the Panama Canal, furthermore, mariners have alternatives to the Malacca Strait—in particular, the Lombok and Sunda Straits, navigable seaways that pierce the southern arc of the Indonesian Archipelago. A glance at the map suggests that with so many access points, shipping can enter and exit the South China Sea with little fear of interference. In his review of Caribbean geography, similarly, Mahan contends that the Antilles present few impediments to shipping despite their auspicious position on the map.⁴⁰ Indeed, the southeastern fringes of the Caribbean verge on being open sea.

But naval technology has come a long way since Mahan's day. Properly armed and fortified, local militaries could contest adversaries' use of nearby straits with relative ease. A mix of fast attack craft, land-based antiship missiles, and underwater mines—perhaps even submarines, for some navies—could give them the dominant say over wartime transit through these narrow seas. Archipelagos can be made formidable barriers.

Local Sea Powers May Punch Above Their Weight

Strategists today cannot simplify the geometry of South China Sea maritime strategy as neatly as Mahan simplified that of the Caribbean basin. Weak Southeast Asian countries are better positioned and equipped to influence their neighborhoods than were weak American states during the fin de siècle era. As map 1 shows, Mahan was able to inscribe a triangle on his map enclosing all important geostrategic features found in the inland seas. A line connecting New Orleans with Colón formed one side. A second side originated at Pensacola and runs through, and somewhat beyond, Saint Thomas. The final leg started at Colón and runs through Cartagena and Curaçao, intersecting with the Pensacola–Saint Thomas leg east of Martinique. Everything outside could be safely excluded from consideration.

Mahan cited two reasons why strategists could concentrate their analytical energies within this triangle. One, applying the position/strength/resources paradigm revealed that there was no seaport of consequence along the desolate coastline stretching westward from New Orleans, along the Texas and Mexican coasts, through the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. Two, Mexico was politically stable and deployed no serious navy. It presented no threat, actual

or latent. Strategists could afford to disregard the shores west of the Mississippi delta, because it was inert from a sea-power standpoint. By default, all significant features lay within the Mahanian triangle.⁴¹

Geostrategists today cannot discount the potential of Southeast Asian states as blithely as Mahan discounted Mexico's a century ago. The entire South China Sea rim merits scrutiny. True, China boasts the most maritime potential of any littoral state in the region—by a wide margin. But unlike Latin American states of the Mahanian age, Southeast Asian states are not mere objects on which great powers work their will. They can influence their marine environs. Inexpensive shore-based weaponry can project force out to sea, harnessing the logic of sea denial even absent powerful fleets.

Not that the region is devoid of respectable fleets. Some states, like Singapore, sport small yet first-rate navies. Singaporean mariners are reputed for their skill and élan, and they operate quality platforms and weaponry. This translates into a measure of control over the approaches to Malacca, as well as the strait itself. Others, notably Vietnam, have set out to field viable maritime forces of their own. Hanoi is acquiring six top-flight, Kilo-class diesel submarines from Russia, furnishing its navy a sea-denial option even vis-à-vis the far stronger PLA Navy.⁴² A Vietnamese Kilo squadron could contest Beijing's claims to sovereignty—control, in other words—over regional waters while complicating the PLA Navy's efforts to exploit the full potential of its submarine base on Hainan or its outpost on Woody Island. A stealthy Kilo lying off, say, Hainan could deter traffic from entering or leaving port, compelling Chinese mariners to undertake time-consuming antisubmarine measures simply to use their Sanya base.

Indonesia too has announced plans to beef up its maritime power.⁴³ Even the Philippines, despite a trivial defense budget, has options in the form of a long-standing mutual-defense pact with the United States and a history of playing host to powerful U.S. sea and air forces. Manila has sought American backing during recent encounters with Beijing, notably the spring 2012 imbroglio at Scarborough Shoal.⁴⁴ American ships have called at Philippine ports more and more often since. The analogy between the South China Sea, with its lopsided naval balance, and the Mediterranean Sea, for centuries an arena of strife among more or less evenly matched naval powers, is closer than that between the South China Sea and the Caribbean of Mahan's day. It could be a hazardous expanse indeed in times of trouble.

The Undersea Dimension

The undersea dimension seems like an afterthought in Mahan's analysis of narrow seas, presumably because Mahan conducted his analysis before submarines had fulfilled their potential. For him the primary concern is that seamounts,

reefs, and other obstructions can narrow the choice of courses for ships cruising on the surface. Careless piloting could leave a surface vessel aground. Such perils persist. In 2013, for example, the mine countermeasures ship USS *Guardian* (MCM 5) foundered on a reef in the Sulu Sea and had to be broken up.⁴⁵

Yet underwater topography is at least as crucial for submarines cruising the depths. A passage's underwater conformation may differ markedly from that on the surface, meaning that submarines may have to trace a somewhat different route to make their way through. They also might have to traverse channels in shallow water, exposing themselves to detection and tracking. This is an uncomfortable prospect for submarine crews, who thrive on concealment. In Mahanian parlance, then, a passage's width, length, and difficulty may be different for submarines than for surface craft. Submarines resemble ground forces in that the terrain beneath them matters—in shallow zones, at any rate.

Not just physical features, furthermore, but a host of variables relating to seawater itself—temperature and salinity, to name two—influence sound propagation, which is central to submarine and antisubmarine operations. Acoustics and kindred subjects are absent from Mahan's works yet shape undersea warfare to a striking degree. It would be worth undertaking a close study of South China Sea subsurface topography and hydrography, compiling an undersea counterpart to his analysis of features with which surface navies must contend. Navies increasingly crowd these waters with advanced submarines, rendering water-space management ever more difficult, while raising the prospect of accidents and incidents beneath the waves. This warrants study.

One sample question: How will Chinese ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) based at Sanya, on Hainan Island, reach patrol grounds in the western Pacific should Beijing choose to send them out? To maintain stealth, SSBNs would first have to evade any adversary picket submarines lying offshore. Once in deep water, they would cruise eastward toward the Philippines. In all likelihood Chinese boats would exit through the Luzon Strait, the narrow sea between Taiwan and the Philippine island of Luzon.

Or, more precisely, maritime geography will force them to exit through the narrow Bashi Channel, near the northern edge of the strait. The Luzon Strait is wide by Mahanian standards, but the Babuyan and Batan Islands complicate matters, jutting out into the strait off northern Luzon. Seamounts and reefs dot the waters separating the northern Batanes from Taiwan, compressing traffic into narrow, somewhat convoluted pathways. This subjects SSBNs and other craft to detection and, in wartime, attack by hostile submarines, antisubmarine aircraft, or surface vessels outfitted for antisubmarine warfare.⁴⁶

Chinese skippers, then, will enjoy deepwater concealment for only part of their voyages, courting danger immediately upon leaving port and when leaving

the South China Sea. To compound the problem, they will be compelled to elude antisubmarine forces operating from Taiwan, Luzon, or more remote sites such as Japan to reach the Pacific high seas. That is a lot of hazardous underwater terrain to traverse. The interplay among topography, hydrography, and strategy promises to take on new salience as PLA Navy commanders confront emerging realities and their opponents mull how to turn strategic geography to their advantage.

Taiwan, the Northern Sentinel

No appraisal of the South China Sea would be complete without a few words about the geostrategic characteristics of Taiwan, which abuts the South China Sea to the north. Comparison between Taiwan and the islands Mahan assessed is inexact but revealing. Taiwan resembles Cuba by certain Mahanian standards. In terms of position, it stands athwart north–south sea-lanes that convey raw materials and finished goods to and from Northeast Asian economies. The island also overlooks and could obstruct east–west routes. Its northern tip, for example, faces Yonaguni, the southernmost point in Japan’s Ryukyu island chain. As with the rest of the Ryukyu straits, land sites adjacent to this narrow sea could be fortified to erect an east–west barrier to Chinese shipping. Also, Taiwan’s southern tip adjoins the Luzon Strait, the best—though, as shown before, far from optimal—portal between the western Pacific and the South China Sea.

The island is sizable, albeit smaller and more compact than Cuba. Much as with Cuba, whoever rules Taiwan enjoys considerable freedom to move forces overland on interior lines, bypassing and offsetting the debilitating impact of a blockade. And numerous seaports of various sizes and shapes dot its long coastline. Minor fishing harbors and marinas, along with caverns and other natural features, could provide ample refuge for flocks of small patrol craft. Larger naval combatants could operate from such major seaports as Keelung and Kao-hsiung.⁴⁷ From the vantage point of natural resources, verdant Taiwan is reasonably well stocked with foodstuffs and other supplies. Its inhabitants, however, depend on imported oil and gas. This represents a critical shortfall. On the whole, however, the island would seem to justify qualified applause from geostrategists.

Yet certain drawbacks recall Mahan’s acerbic commentary on Jamaica, when juxtaposed to nearby Cuba. Taiwan may flank key SLOCs, but the long Chinese coastline envelops the island in turn. PLA naval and air forces face the island along many axes, much as ships based at Cuban ports could interdict shipping bound to or from Jamaica. Only Taiwanese forces stronger than nearby sea- and shore-based PLA assets could release the island’s full geostrategic potential in the face of Chinese enmity. The island’s armed forces, however, are unlikely to regain their qualitative advantage over the PLA, let alone overwhelm their antagonists with superior numbers. It would be politically unthinkable for Taipei to reopen

the island to U.S. or other outside forces—even if external powers declared themselves willing to return and thereby to ratchet up tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

Should the mainland impose its rule on Taiwan, however, the island will come to resemble Key West, an outpost adjoining important sea-lanes and carrying enormous offensive and defensive potentials for the great power that owns it.⁴⁸ This new, old asset would extend China's seaward reach eastward into the western Pacific, turn the southern flanks of Japan and South Korea, granting Beijing newfound geostrategic leverage over its rivals, and emplace PLA forces in a commanding position along the northern rim of the South China Sea. From there they could project power westward into the Taiwan Strait, eastward into the Pacific Ocean, northward along the "first island chain," or southward into the Luzon Strait or the South China Sea. Perhaps most importantly, the PLA would have burst through the island-chain barrier, which Beijing regards as a latter-day implement of containment and an impediment to east–west movement between the China seas and the western Pacific.

In operational terms, PLA forces stationed on Taiwan could shield the mainland from prospective adversaries, such as the United States and its allies, regulate Northeast Asian competitors' seaborne communications, and guarantee free access through the Luzon Strait for Chinese men-of-war—including the SSBNs discussed before—while threatening to interrupt opponents' access.

Thinking about Taiwan as a geostrategic asset is by no means new. Admiral Ernest King, the Chief of Naval Operations during World War II, affirmed that the power that controlled Formosa could "put the cork in the bottle" of the South China Sea for adversaries. The reciprocal advantage: that power could keep the bottle uncorked for its own use.⁴⁹ Analyses like King's help explain why the United States affixed such value to Taiwan during the Cold War and why China does today. This "unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender," to quote General Douglas MacArthur, helped anchor American containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and China, constraining communist movements up and down the Asian seaboard.⁵⁰

Doubters might say that such metaphors represent an antiquarian way of looking at Taiwan. Chinese officialdom evidently disagrees. The important Chinese manual *Science of Military Strategy*, for example, constitutes an authoritative guide to how the PLA leadership views China's strategic surroundings. "The reunification of China's mainland and Taiwan," its framers declare, is "something that concerns China's national sovereignty and territorial sovereignty." Their appraisal is worth quoting at length. The island, they observe, lies "in the key area" of maritime communications for East Asia. Sea lines of communication "from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia, as well as the route from the West Pacific to the Middle East, Europe and Asia pass

here. [Taiwan] is a sea transportation hub connecting Shanghai and Hong Kong, Ryukyu and Manila, Yokosuka and Cam Ranh Bay and Strait of Malacca.”⁵¹

Gaining control of Taiwan is a matter of immense strategic import for Beijing, regardless of whether Western commentators concur with Chinese strategists about the island’s military potential. The *Science of Military Strategy* authors add:

And [Taiwan] is where we can breach the chain of the islands surrounding us in the West Pacific . . . as well as a strategic key area and sea barrier for defense and offense. If Taiwan should be alienated from the mainland, not only our natural maritime defense system would lose its depth, opening a sea gateway to the outside forces, but also a large area of water territory . . . will fall into the hands of others. . . . [O]ur line of foreign trade and transportation . . . will be exposed to the surveillance and threats of separatist and enemy forces, and China will forever be locked to the west side of the first chain of islands in the West Pacific.⁵²

China, they conclude, has “no room for compromise” on this geostrategic asset. If peaceful methods of cross-strait unification prove ineffective, military means will be “the only alternative.”⁵³ Nor is this a peculiarly Chinese Communist prognosis. It conforms to long-standing views, including that of Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who insisted that losing any part of China’s geographic periphery compromises the integrity of the whole.⁵⁴ From Beijing’s perspective, preserving the defensive system warrants the utmost resolve and effort.

A UNIQUE PERIPHERAL SEA

Finally, two critical differences separate the South China Sea from both the Caribbean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. First, there are relatively convenient alternatives to traveling through maritime Southeast Asia. It is possible, that is, to detour around the South China Sea without undertaking voyages of epic scope like the ones around Tierra del Fuego or the Cape of Good Hope. The Pacific-based U.S. battleship *Oregon* was forced to circumnavigate South America in 1898 to get into the Caribbean fight against Spain.⁵⁵ The battlewagon’s arduous transit lent credence to Mahanian advocacy on behalf of an isthmian canal. A few short years later, in 1904–1905, the Russian Baltic Fleet, denied the use of the Suez Canal, had to steam around Africa, across the Indian Ocean, and through the South China Sea and waters adjoining Taiwan to engage the Imperial Japanese Navy.⁵⁶

Distance was clearly a problem in these instances. There was no alternative to a protracted cruise in the former case, while Japan’s ally Great Britain closed the Suez to Russia in the latter. Neither geography nor enemy strategy, by contrast, compels anyone to traverse contemporary Southeast Asian waters. Circumventing this marginal sea imposes significant costs in terms of extra fuel, wear and

tear on equipment, and crew fatigue, but such challenges are manageable compared to rounding South America or Africa.

Second, there are potential naval stations outside the southern perimeter of the South China Sea. Many lie in Australia. Forces based there can swing from side to side between the Indian Ocean and western Pacific without ever venturing into Southeast Asia. This qualifies Robert Kaplan's analogy between the South China Sea and a throat. A throat is the only route from one place to another, whereas Australia-based forces enjoy the luxury of entering the South China Sea at points of their choosing—bypassing the throat.

Australia thus bestrides an invaluable position at the seam between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, external to Southeast Asia. The U.S.-Australian agreement to station a rotating contingent of U.S. Marines at Darwin, along the northern Australian coast, leverages this convenient geostrategic reality.⁵⁷ Also, while Canberra has demurred thus far, Washington may try to expand the basing arrangement to stage heavy U.S. Navy forces in Australia, perhaps at the western seaport of Perth. The merits of an external yet nearby geographic position are too obvious to ignore. Whether alliance politics will permit a realignment this bold remains to be seen.⁵⁸ Much depends on how aggressively China conducts itself in the region.

The South China Sea, then, represents a maritime crossroads that commands enormous worth for seafaring states while presenting few opportunities for permanent forward basing. Because of its dearth of island outposts, it will prove difficult for any would-be hegemon to command—even a coastal state like China that is replete with maritime potential. An oceangoing fleet able to project power throughout the region will be a must for any power with designs on sea command. China has achieved impressive progress toward a blue-water navy while fielding its first coast guard and an imposing array of land-based weaponry able to strike at sea. This portends well from its standpoint.

Nonetheless, Beijing has taken on an imposing slate of commitments along its nautical periphery, ranging from managing events on the Korean Peninsula, to the north, through recovering Taiwan, at the midpoint, to fostering maritime security at Malacca, to the extreme southwest. These commitments stretch finite assets thin. China's naval project remains a work in progress, meaning that any decision to concentrate assets in Southeast Asia places other, equally pressing interests at risk. Alfred Thayer Mahan would doubt China's capacity to enforce its will in Southeast Asia any time soon.⁵⁹

Mahan might question America's longevity there as well—and beseech American decision makers to shore up its position, both by keeping the U.S. Navy strong and by courting close ties with regional allies and partners. Otherwise, the pillars of American sea power in a theater of vital interest may prove wobbly

indeed. Strategists could do worse than to use his framework to think through these challenges.

NOTES

The views voiced here are the author's alone.

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