How to Cite:
Ashok Ram (Dec 2018). THE PIVOTAL SEAS - A KEY TO CONQUEROR THE WORLD
International Journal of Economic Perspectives,*12*(1), 207-215
Retrieved from https://ijeponline.com/index.php/journal/article

"THE PIVOTAL SEAS - A KEY TO CONQUEROR THE WORLD"

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ABSTRACT: Between the American Civil War and World War-I, a revolution occurred in the sphere of sea warfare. At the nucleus of this change were rapid technological advancements which profoundly influenced the conduct of war. Accordingly, strategy and tactics also underwent significant changes. The period saw the coming of a school of naval theorists who expounded the doctrine of "Command of the Sea." By the same logic, he also found the study of sea history instructive by its application of the general principles of maritime war. Thus, the author discusses throughout his work, Mahan maintained the central theme of the supreme importance of sea power in the shaping of national destinies and bring forth the necessary element that are crucial for the development of sea power.

Keywords: Command of the Sea, Geographical position, Physical configuration, extent of territory, Population, National character

INTRODUCTION: At the outbreak of the First Punic War, Rome being a land power possessed only a small naval force, though it had large mercantile fleet. Because of this inadequacy of sea power, Rome's opponent Carthage, was able to greatly restrict the Roman sea trade by dominating the western position of the Mediterranean Sea. It, therefore, became a military compulsion for Rome to build a strong naval force to safeguard its commercial interests. In the present age, too, more or less similar compulsions prompt navies to draw upon science and technology in a manner undreamt of in the formative stages to upgrade their sea power naval development. As Admiral Stephen B Luce has so pertinently pointed out, from the days of ancient Tire, the birthplace of ocean commerce and navigation, the scepter of the seas has been wielded, successively, by states grown opulent through ocean commerce. Sea power, in its military sense, is the offspring, not the parents of commerce. Both from the military and economic view, an extensive maritime commerce is of primal necessity to a country aspiring to become a naval power[1]. It is in this context that a study and analysis of the thoughts of A.T. Mahan acquires significance.

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Mahan's particular area of interest was the significance of control of the sea, both commercial and military, information and development of national policy. Notwithstanding the fact that military and political histories are closely related, he chose to focus on the former, the new history, with its emphasis on social and cultural elements, was beyond his purview. Drawing upon the history of the 17th and 18th centuries, Mahan under scored those elements of naval strategy which had proved successful in the past. Thus, from a historiographical point of view, Mahan may be regarded as the "founder of a new school of historical study."[2]

THEORY OF SEA POWER

To Mahan, sea power and naval strategy were determined predominantly by certain fundamental natural factors and by national policies. The history of sea power is largely a military history, "a narrative of contests between nations of mutual rivalries of violence frequently culminating in war.[3] Study of the military history of the past was strongly recommended by great military leaders as essential to correct ideas and to skillful conduct of war in the future. Mahan accepted the suggestion of other theorists that many of the conditions of war varied from age to age with the progress in developments of weapons. He felt that ``certain teachings in the school of history which remain constant and, therefore, of universal application, can be elevated to the rank of general principles."[4] By the same logic, he also found the study of sea history instructive by its application of the general principles of maritime war.

Throughout his work, Mahan maintained the central theme of the supreme importance of sea power in the shaping of national destinies. His interest in sea power was much wider because of various developments that took place in the 17th and 18th centuries. Sea power, to him, was by no means synonymous with naval power;[5] it really connoted the power to use the seas during peace and war to the best advantage. His basic hypothesis was that "sea power was vital to national growth, prosperity and security."[6]. It embraced all that tended to make a people great upon the sea, or by the seas. Though Mahan wrote about the days of sailing ships, he wisely related history to the steam powered times in which he lived. As a result, some of his prognoses have about them an enduring validity.

A broad general consideration of the subject enabled Mahan to identify certain elements or sources of sea power. He listed six such principal elements: geographical position, physical configuration, extent of territory, population, national character, and character of government.

Geographical Position: The validity of geography as an essential determinant of sea power has never been challenged by naval historians and analysts. In this regard, Mahan points out that if a country's location is such that it is neither forced to defend itself by land

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war induced to seek extension of its territory by way of land, it has, by the very unity of its aim directed upon the sea, an advantage as compared with a people one of whose boundaries is continental.[7] The insular position of Great Britain, for instance, provided it with a great advantage over France and Holland in terms of sea power. Britain's strategic position relieved the government of the necessity or temptation of maintaining and using a large army, which also prevented a drain on national wealth. While the strength of Holland was early exhausted by the necessity of maintaining a large army and carrying on costly wars to preserve territorial integrity, in France's case, strategic policy, sometimes wisely and sometimes foolishly, was constantly diverted from the sea to projects of continental extension.

The geographical position of country, according to Mahan, may also determine the promotion of concentration or dispersal of its naval forces. In this regard, France, as compared to Great Britain, was in disadvantageous position because of its frontiers touching as they did the Mediterrean as well as the ocean; they constituted a great obstacle to effective consolidation of sea power. The Straits of Gibraltar area was the only point where the French eastern and western fleets could be united-but only at a great threat to security and financial loss.

England's case was quite different because of compulsion associated with its immense colonial empire. It had to deny itself much of the advantage it could have derived from a concentration of force around its own shores. Mahan commended England's strategy in this regard, and noted that the ultimate gains resulting from it were greater than the loss. With the expansion of its colonies, British war fleets, merchant shipping and wealth also grew at a rapid pace. Spain on the other hand, despite being a great power, had to suffer humiliation and even loss at many points because of a relatively weak navy.

The geographical position of a country, says Mahan, may not only favour concentration of its forces, but also give it the strategic advantage of a central position and a good base for hostile operations against its probable enemies.[8] This again is illustrated by Britain's central position. On the one hand, Britain faced Holland and the northern powers, and on the other, France and the Atlantic. When threatened with a coalition between France and the naval powers of the North Sea and the Baltic, British fleets in the Downs and in the Channel and even that of Brest occupied interior positions. In this way, British fleets were readily able to interpose their united force to pre-empt anyone of the enemies from passing through the channel to effect a unification of natural factors in the form of better ports and a safer coast to approach. Indeed, it was largely Britain's geographical position that enabled it to control one of the greatest sea thoroughfares of the world. This kind of unique geographical advantage did not exist in the case of Holland, Sweden, Russia and Denmark, and hence they had to face serious commercial challenges.

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Mahan also saw clearly that the United States possessed to a lesser degree than Britain the elements conducive to growth of sea power. Noting that like Britain the United States occupied an insular position, Mahan put forth the view that opening of a trans-isthmian canal at Panama would alter the relation of the United States to the Caribbean and render it similar to that of England to the channel or of England to the Mediterranean with proper military preparations, the United States could then exercise dominant sea power in the area.[9]

Geography also reveals its influence in the choice of military bases. Bases when well-located have been stages for wielding tremendous power. England, by acquiring Gibraltar and Malta, was in a position to maintain a large measure of control in the Mediterranean and thereby play a dominant role both in commercial and military term in world affairs.

Physical Configuration: The element of physical configuration largely determines the disposition of a people to seek and attain sea power. Mahan believed that the seaboard of a country was one of its frontiers and the deeper and more numerous the harbors, especially if they were outlets of navigable streams, the greater was the tendency for intercourse with the outside world.[10] The strength of a country lies in good harbors. Without them no country can imagine sea trade, shipping and a navy of its own. This was the case with Belgium when it was a part of a Spanish and Austrian province. The Dutch in 1648, after a successful war, decreed that the Scheldt should be closed to sea commerce. This shut down the harbor of Antwerp and transferred the sea trade of Belgium to Holland. The Spanish Netherland ceased to be a sea power.

Though numerous and deep harbors are a source of strength and wealth, their easy accessibility in the absence of proper defense can be source of weakness in war. Mahan noted that there were other physical conditions which led people to the sea or turned them away from it. Although France lacked military ports on the channel, this was compensated for by excellent harbors on the ocean and in the Mediterranean. The pleasant land with a delightful climate made it unnecessary for the French people to turn to the sea unless they so desired. On the other hand, Britain, because of its policy of imperial expansion, encouraged its people to voyage abroad and in the process they found lands more pleasant and richer than their own. Their compulsions and genius first made them merchants and colonists and then manufacturers and producers. As a consequence, Britain's sea power expanded.

Mahan also suggested that peninsular nations like Italy must of necessity be strong in terms of sea power if they wanted to play a more powerful role in European affairs. Italy's physical conditions were such that it possessed a long peninsula with a central

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range of mountains dividing it into two narrow strips. As such, absolute control of the adjoining seas was not only desirable but necessary in the interests of national security.

In the case of the United States, Mahan was of the view that its physical configuration possessed elements of both strength and weakness. He struck a cautionary note about the vulnerability of the country's numerous deep harbors and stressed the need for their proper defense. He also saw a similarity between the United States and France in the fact that both countries physical configuration kept the majority of the people away from the sea, with the center of power lying in the interior. He felt the situation would have been more beneficial for the United States had there been only a fringe of settled land along the Atlantic coast. But he averred, when "the day comes that shipping again pays, when the three sea frontiers find that they are not only militarily weak, but poorer for lack of national shipping their united efforts may avail to lay again the foundations of our sea power".[11] Mahan noted that those who understood the importance of sea power may mourn that their own country is being led like France into the same neglect of that instrument".[12]

Extent of Territory: Extent of territory was the last of the conditions pertaining to the country structure as distinguished from its people which affected development of sea power.[13] In this context, Mahan observed that it was not the total number of square miles which constituted a country but the length of the coastline and the character of the harbors that were to be considered. In this view, the geographical and physical conditions being the same the extent of the sea coast was a source of strength or weakness according as the population was large or small.[14] If vast stretches of land were cut up by rivers or estuaries, the latter would constitute an additional source of weakness. Mahan argued that in the American Civil War, the extent of its territory was the source of weakness for the South against the North. The confederacy not only lacked a navy but its population was not interested in the sea and was not ``proportioned to the extent of the sea coast which it had to defend." Therefore, the United States had to exert its power on both coasts.

Population Factor: After the consideration of the natural conditions of a country, Mahan took up those factors which were important for development of sea power. One such factor was population. It has already been pointed out that, with reference to sea power, it is not the total number of square miles but also the extent and character of the sea coast that are important. Similarly, regarding population, it is not quantity but quality that matters. In other words, it is not the total population but the percentage associated with the sea, as ship builders or seafarers that constitute a stable element of sea power. During the long colonial wars, Britain, in contrast to an agricultural France, remained a commercial maritime nation. As such,

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Mahan believed, Britain should not only have substantial numbers of men but should have a large proportion of this population engaged directly or indirectly in maritime occupation. A nation's peacetime commerce, he pointed out, was an index of its staying power in naval wars. There must, therefore, be a large reserve force among the population that was engaged in various crafts which would facilitate the making and repairing of ships both in time of peace and in time of war. Britain, besides being a sea going nation was also a ship building and trading nation. It possessed the essential ingredients of human and technical resources which are so important in naval wars. On the other hand, in terms of peaceful commerce and military efficiency, France occupied an inferior position.

Mahan also stressed the need for maintaining the existing "shield of defensive power." If time be a supreme factor in war, he observed, it behaves countries whose genius was essentially not military, whose people like all free people, objected to pay for large military establishments to see to it-that they were at least strong enough to gain the time necessary to turn the spirit and capacity of their subjects into the new activities which war called for. If the existing force, by land or sea, was strong enough to hold out even if it were at a disadvantage, the country could rely upon its natural resources and strengths coming into play for whatever they were worth-its numbers, its wealth, its capacities of every kind. If on the other hand, whatever force it had could be overthrown and crushed quickly, the most magnificent possibilities of natural power would not save it from humiliating conditions nor, if its foe were wise, from guarantees which would postpone revenge to a distant future.[15]

Mahan felt that the position of the United States was liked that of Holland, where the people would spend money for their defense only when actually faced with danger. The country had no "shield of defensive power" behind which the people might develop their reserves of strength. Its sea faring population was far from adequate for possible needs, and foundations for such a class could be laid only in large commerce under the American Flay.[16]

National Character: Another important feature of sea power is the national character and aptitude of the people. History affirms "almost with exception" that the aptitude for commercial pursuits has been a distinguishing feature of nations great upon the seas. The natural beat of a people toward trade, involving not only production of something to sell but also the belief that commerce is an honorable as well as a lucrative calling is "the national characteristic most important in the development of sea power".[17]

Yet in another way, the national genius affects the growth of sea power as it possesses the capacity for planting healthy colonies. Like others growths, colonization is most healthy when it is most natural. Therefore, Mahan observed, colonies that evolved

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from the felt wants and natural impulses of a whole people would have the most solid foundations. The "healthy colony" rested upon more than placid satisfaction with gain alone and it contained the principle of growth accompanied by political ambition. The character of the colonist rather than the policy of the home government was the basic principle upon which the growth of the colony depended. The good colonist settled down and identified himself with his new land, and even if he might maintain collections of his former home, he had no restless eagerness to return. In this respect, England's unique and wonderful success as a great colonizing nation lay mainly in two traits of the national character: first the settlement and identification of his interest with the new country and second, development of the resources of the new country in the broadest sense. Mahan believed that in the most important single element of sea power, character of the people, the Americans ranked unusually high. He saw no reason to doubt that his compatriots possessed aptitudes for commerce, for self-government and independence similar to those of the English. He thought that if "legislative hindrances" could be removed and more remunerative fields of enterprise be filled up, sea power would soon begin to develop. "The instinct for commerce", the love of "bold enterprise in the pursuit of gain," and a "keen scent for the trails that lead to it," all existed in the American people.[18]

Character of Government: Mahan noted that certain forms of government and the character of rulers from time to time had a tremendous influence upon the development of sea power. Just as the various traits of a country and its people constituted the natural characteristics, the conduct of a government corresponded to the exercise of intelligent will power. He pointed out that the success or failure of a nation depended upon a wise energetic and persevering policy. In the matter of sea power, he observed that the most brilliant successes had followed where there had been intelligent direction by a government fully imbued with the spirit of the people and conscious of its true general bent.19 From a study of several specific instances drawn from the history of England, France and Holland, Mahan concluded that a government influenced the sea associated activities and enterprise in two distinct but closely related ways. In time of peace, governmental policy could favour the natural growth of a people's sea related industries and tendencies to seek adventure and gain by way of the sea or could try to develop such industries and encourage a sea going inclination where these did not naturally exist. On the other hand, a government could by mistaken action check and fetter the progress which the people, left to them, would have made. In the matter of peaceful commerce, the influence of a government would be felt in the making or marring of the country's sea power. Mahan illustrated this with the example of France, whose sea power improved significantly under Colbert's policy of giving importance to production, shipping, colonies and markets, but withered away like Jonah's guard (gourd) when government favour was withdrawn.

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CONCLUSION:

In war time, Mahan noted, the appropriate government policy would be to maintain an armed navy of a size that was in proportion to the extent of the country's shipping activity and the importance of the interests connected with it. More important than the size of the navy, he stressed, was the question of its institutions. It was the task of the government to provide adequate reserves of men and ships and maintain suitable naval stations. Such stations were best protected either by a direct military force – as in the cases of Gibraltar and Malta or by a surrounding friendly population as the American colonists once were to England.

Mahan was quite critical of absence of a sound American policy for development of the country's sea strength. The United States was woefully weak in the matter of foreign establishment of either a colonial or a military nature, he observed. In this context, he pointed out the evil effects of the false economy of the Dutch in their general commercial policy and urged that the lesson derived there from should serve as a constant warning to the United States.

In this way did Mahan discuss the principal elements which have affected favorably or unfavorably, the growth of the sea power of various nations? His essential methodology was to first consider the natural tendencies of the different elements to encourage or deter development of sea power and, then, to illustrate the validity of his conclusions with the help of specific examples drawn from experiences of the past. These considerations and principles are unchangeable and remain applicable from age to age.

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[8] Ibid, 286.

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[11] Earle, op cit, p 426.

[12] Ibid.

[13] W.E. Livezey, op.cit. p. 44.

[14] A. Westcott, op cit, p.40.

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