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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF NAVAL STRATEGY IN  
THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION 1500-2000**

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF NAVAL STRATEGY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION 1500-2000<sup>1</sup>

John Reeve

The Asia-Pacific region is one of the great historical theatres of the world, where many of humanity's greatest dramas have been—and continue to be—played out. An essentially maritime environment, stretching from the central Pacific to the Persian Gulf and centering on East and Southeast Asia, it encompasses approximately half the globe. In the past a great arena of contact between civilisations and of imperial wealth and power, today it is the stage for over half the world's trade and the interests of great (and potentially great) powers such as the United States (US), China and Japan, as well as a host of lesser-ranking states. History is not only an absorbing story in itself. It tends to shed light on the contemporary world, which continues that story. This paper explores the naval strategic history of the Asia-Pacific, providing a context for understanding current and prospective regional developments. The paper employs a wide-angled chronological lens. This implies a thematic approach, and aids perspective in mapping continuity and change. We begin in about 1500, when the advent of the modern warship—a significantly destructive gun platform with oceanic reach—created the modern world of integrated strategy and international relations. We end today, when the region is a great centre of commerce, international rivalry and potential conflict. While our theme is naval strategy, it is also of course the wider maritime and social environment in which it is formulated. The subject is thus the strategic character of the Asia-Pacific, for strategy is about choices conditioned by contexts.

This paper presents an argument about the naval strategic character of the region, maintaining that there are essential continuities in its nature, as well as at least one very significant new factor in the late twentieth century and especially the last generation. What continuities have characterised the region?

- Geographical. The region is not simply a maritime but a *maritime-littoral* environment: a land-sea interface in which land and sea are very

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much interpenetrated. Great oceans border this interface in the east and west, hence *maritime-littoral*.

- Economic. This is a highly commercial region, dependent upon sea transport, which is bound up with economic globalisation—today as in earlier times.
- Political. The region has been an area of great power rivalry and empire, involving the interaction of local and external powers.
- Cultural. The region has been a place of cultural contact, cultural friction, and cross-cultural military technological transfer, with Asian adoption of external and Western weaponry.

The particular implications of these factors have been:

- maritime leverage against the land;
- the importance of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and choke points;
- the combination of naval and amphibious strategic means;
- the role of naval diplomacy, presence, and attempts at coercion;
- the combination of low and high intensity naval operations from constabulary level to warfighting roles;
- the influence of great distances upon strategic calculations;
- preoccupation with resources: their location, transportation, and exploitation, including oil in the twentieth century;
- the importance and influence of global economic and political contexts; and
- cultural factors which can contribute to instability and influence strategy.

One might argue that such themes are more or less common to various regions of the globe. But one can also hold credibly in response that they have a series of strong individual profiles and a collective character in the Asia-Pacific that give it a degree of uniqueness in terms of naval strategic affairs.

### **Development of the region's strategic character 1500-1900**

Europeans entered the Asia-Pacific by sea during the late fifteenth century. The Portuguese rounded the African Cape and had direct access to the Indian pepper trade by 1500, returning via the same route to Lisbon thus

outflanking the Turkish Empire. Portuguese ships harassed the traditional Moslem-Venetian trade route through the Middle East and drove up spice prices at Alexandria. The Portuguese established an empire of trading posts throughout the region, revolving around their naval base at Goa on the west coast of India.<sup>2</sup> The sixteenth century saw the heyday of this empire, but conflict with English and Dutch traders and paramilitary forces from about 1580 caused Portugal's Asian hegemony to decline. The Dutch, the next major regional power, flourished in the seventeenth century, making their principal strategic target the Moluccas (or Spice Islands) in modern Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> Dutch power in Asia was naval and commercial, infiltrating and extending the old Portuguese Empire and creating a stranglehold on the regional economy. The Dutch used diplomacy with local rulers and force against competitors, establishing their central base in Java and controlling the Malacca Strait by 1641. The English challenged Dutch power in Asia during the seventeenth century but found the East Indies too well defended, and diverted their efforts to India (much as they found that Spanish defence of central America caused them to turn to North America: the English tradition of indirect strategy has a long history). The English entered Sino-Indian trade in the late seventeenth century,<sup>4</sup> establishing control of the sub-continent during the next hundred years. India, with the China trade, became the linchpin of the Victorian Empire. In the nineteenth century Britain used naval power against China to acquire treaty ports, project power up great rivers, and open up trade. Britain consolidated control of the Indian Ocean with the annexation of Burma, occupation of Aden, and a presence in the Gulf.<sup>5</sup>

This story reveals the major strategic features of the region. Early modern European presence and power in Asia were essentially maritime-littoral. It was sea power which made possible the creation of an Asia-Pacific regional economy. European power centres and trading posts were ports, from Goa in the sixteenth century to Batavia in the seventeenth and Hong Kong in the nineteenth. Europeans utilised naval presence to project power against the land in Indonesia, India, and China. European strategy also aimed to exploit regional commercial opportunities within the context of a global economy, utilising naval power and maritime transport. The nexus was always of military-commercial power. Naval operations tended to have direct and

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<sup>2</sup> See C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415-1825*, London, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> See C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800*, London, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> J. Reeve, 'Britain and the World under the Stuarts 1603-1689', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Tudor and Stuart Britain*, ed. J. Morrill, Oxford, 1996, pp. 418, 423, 426, 430.

<sup>5</sup> A. Lambert, 'The Shield of Empire, 1815-1895' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy*, ed., J.R. Hill, Oxford, 1995, pp. 180ff.

important commercial consequences, from the Portuguese attack on Calicut in 1502 to the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. The regional pattern was also of great power rivalry, and of interaction and conflict between regional and external powers. Europeans exported their competition, as well as coming into conflict with non-European peoples. There was also the cultural influence, with frequent racial and religious dimensions to friction and conflict. Cross-cultural transfer of military technology was also a strategic factor. Before the nineteenth century, Chinese and Japanese adoption of European ways, particularly in artillery and fortress architecture, facilitated resistance to European attacks. The Western industrial revolution provided more powerful weaponry which finally caused East Asia to succumb.<sup>6</sup>

We can also detect more specific strategic patterns. The European presence in Asia was perhaps the most remarkable example in history of maritime leverage against the land. Europeans entered Asia in numbers vastly inferior to those of the great civilisations of the East. They remained on the fringes of Asian societies, ultimately unable to reshape them by settler strategies as in the American hemisphere.<sup>7</sup> It was the technological advantage of their navies, used ruthlessly, which gave them a strategic edge despite their demographic inferiority. Fleets were used to acquire harbours and the harbours were then fortified. Portuguese Malacca had walls of two kilometres and withstood ten sieges.<sup>8</sup> Fortresses were progressively used in conjunction with armies, but sea power was the key. The Royal Navy enabled the checking of French ambitions in India during the eighteenth century, and the occupation of Malaya and Java and engagement of China by the nineteenth. One half of the globe had established economic and political hegemony over the other. It is difficult to think of a more dramatic example of navies as force multipliers for small nations, as inherently strategic instruments, and as military forces having an influence out of all proportion to the numbers of people they involve.

SLOCs and choke points were vital within this strategic picture. Sea communications were continually utilised and interdicted. Many key maritime locations of this period remain important: The Cape, The Gulf, Bombay, Malacca-Singapore, and Hong Kong. The combination of naval and amphibious operations was frequent within the maritime-littoral environment,

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<sup>6</sup> G. Parker, *The Military Revolution. Military Innovation and the Rise of the West 1500-1800*, second edition, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 136-145.

<sup>7</sup> The European settlement of Australasia was an exception to this regional pattern, but still an integral part of the British maritime strategic framework. See A. Frost, *The Voyage of the Endeavour. Captain Cook and the Discovery of the Pacific*, St Leonards, NSW, 1998, repr. 1999, pp. 121ff.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, *Military Revolution*, p. 122.



from the securing of bases by the Portuguese to British power projection in China. Naval diplomacy was frequently used in dealing with Asian rulers, China being the classic historical case of gunboat diplomacy. Naval operations ranged from low to high intensity, from sea control and harassment to fleet actions. Distance was an even greater factor in the region before steam power and cable and wireless communications. It meant that metropolitan centres in Europe delegated great power to local commanders and viceroys. Resources were the major regional issue everywhere. Spices were the original motive for European expeditions, and became the basis of Portuguese and largely of Dutch wealth. Europeans developed many intra-regional trades, the British, for example, dealing in textiles, tea and opium. Local military-commercial strategy was an inextricable part of the global economic and political context. European power politics, with the associated search for riches, were a conditioning factor. Navies were the tools of the new competing nation states engaged in global rivalries. Maritime power enabled this competition, with the Renaissance understanding of the sea as one—even more true after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Cultural factors were usually at work in the region. Lack of religious toleration under the Portuguese isolated them politically and helped weaken their empire. Chinese resentment of foreign intrusion led to war with European powers.

### **Continuity and change in the twentieth century**

The naval strategic history of the region in the twentieth century shows a continuity of patterns from the early modern era. A brief survey will illustrate the point. The Russo-Japanese War saw Japanese victory in a major fleet action at Tsushima combined with power projection on the Asian mainland. A major naval power had arisen in East Asia. As war clouds gathered before 1914, Germany planned commerce war against the sea-lanes of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific—plans which failed to materialise with the flight and defeat of the German East Asia Squadron.<sup>9</sup> British, Japanese, Australian, and New Zealand forces protected trade routes, occupied German Pacific possessions, and escorted troops to the Middle East and Europe.

Japanese ambitions led to Asian continental war in the 1930s and to extensive southern conquests in the 1940s.<sup>10</sup> Essentially the Japanese took Southeast Asia from the land, employing amphibious power projection against

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<sup>9</sup> P. Overlack, 'Asia in German Naval Planning Before the First World War: The Strategic Imperative', *War and Society*, 17, 1, May 1999.

<sup>10</sup> For a general analysis of the naval strategy of the Pacific War see F. Uhlig, Jr., *How Navies Fight. The US Navy and its Allies*, Annapolis, 1994, chap. 6.

Indo-China, Malaya, and Singapore. Japanese land-based air forces sank the battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* and destroyed half the US air force in the Philippines (they launched their attacks from Vietnam and Formosa respectively).<sup>11</sup> Yamamoto understood the land-sea interface, seeking to invade Australia to eliminate it as a base for counter-attack against Japan. The Japanese army, however, was preoccupied with the Asian mainland and won out over the navy.<sup>12</sup> The Allied counter-offensive succeeded by *force majeure* applied in a manner consistent with the nature of the region. Tojo told MacArthur that the Allies defeated Japan by a combination of three factors: the leapfrogging strategy, the submarine war on shipping, and US carrier air power.<sup>13</sup> Allied strategy utilised amphibious landings and land-based air power in littoral warfare, as well as attacks on the Japanese SLOCs, and oceanic sea control which made all of this possible. The fighting around Guadalcanal, New Guinea, the Philippines, and in the central Pacific concentrated on the land-sea interface. The US submarine war became the most successful blockade in history, severing Japan from its southern resources and destroying its merchant marine.<sup>14</sup> Japanese failure to defend this shipping was related to narrowly Mahanian ideas, but also—one suspects—to conceiving of regional conquests as territory to be defended with a perimeter rather than underwritten by sea communications. Major fleet actions were critical, as when the Coral Sea and Midway turned the tide; but such battles were also closely linked to the defence of land.<sup>15</sup> Japan was defeated by overwhelming force, but also by failure to utilise the nature of the region in defence. The search for decisive sea battle, as opposed to submarine attacks on the Allied SLOCs (especially during the Allied build-up in 1942), was particularly fatal.

After 1945 the West used naval power in Korea to shape the conflict, project force against the Asian mainland, and retrieve and stabilise the war.<sup>16</sup> It did not, however, allow victory after the entry of China with the military resources of an Asian continental power. There is something of a parallel with

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> P. Kennedy, 'Japanese Strategic Decisions, 1939-45', in Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945*, London, 1983, repr. 1984, p.186.

<sup>13</sup> S.E. Morison, 'Thoughts on Naval Strategy, World War II' (March 1968), *Naval War College Review*, LI, 1, Winter 1998, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> In 1943-44 Japanese merchant tonnage was reduced from 6 to 2.9 million tons. Uhlig, *How Navies Fight*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>15</sup> The Battle of the Coral Sea prevented a Japanese attack on Port Moresby. Midway secured Hawaii and the sea-lanes to Australia and threatened Guadalcanal, itself a threat to Australian sea communications. *Ibid.*, pp.210, 275

<sup>16</sup> G.W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The US Navy 1890-1990*, Stanford, 1994, pp. 323-4.

the American war in Vietnam, which saw the problem of landward supply to the enemy in the South, as well as the Soviet maritime lifeline to the North. This continental logistic factor, with political restraint of the sea blockade against Haiphong until 1972, created problems for Western naval power and particularly for the US Navy's blue water tradition.<sup>17</sup> Saigon fell to assault from the land, just as Singapore had before it, and as with Singapore this victory within the land-sea interface had implications for naval strategy. The Soviet navy benefitted from access to Cam Ranh Bay, and developed a more forward presence in the Asia-Pacific by the 1980s. This strategy sought to consolidate the defence of the USSR, surround China, distract and extend the West, and develop alliances and prestige in the region, always hoping for an integral warm water port. Gorshkov's belief in the use of fleets against other fleets as well as the shore was suited to the region.<sup>18</sup> The West, however, used sea power effectively during the wider Cold War in Asia, deterring continental communist power, protecting the prosperity and SLOCs of non-communist states, and building regional alliances—all of which limited the damage of the defeat in Indo-China.<sup>19</sup> The US global Maritime Strategy of the 1980s suited the Asia-Pacific, involving both blue water and littoral elements in its general concern with sea control and power projection against the Soviet Union<sup>20</sup>

We see in this survey of twentieth century regional naval affairs an underlining of early modern patterns. The strategic environment remained maritime-littoral and wise planners understood it. These included MacArthur, whose reconquest of New Guinea was virtually a strategic mirror image of the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia—employing amphibious power projection supported by land-based air cover, and supplied by merchant shipping while naval forces covered with sea control.<sup>21</sup> Allied strategy in the Pacific War, while involving political agendas, was tailor-made for the region. The naval offensive in the central Pacific covered the flank of the advance through the Southeast Asian littorals.<sup>22</sup> The region also remained highly commercial, and dependent upon sea transport. It was still an arena of great

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 384ff; Uhlig, *How Navies Fight*, pp. 348-51.

<sup>18</sup> B. Ranft and G. Till, *The Sea in Soviet Strategy*, London, 1989, pp. 78ff; G. Till, 'Luxury Fleet? The Sea Power of (Soviet) Russia', in *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, ed N.A.M. Rodger, Annapolis, 1996, pp. 23-4; D. da Cunha, *Soviet Naval Power in the Pacific*, Boulder and London, 1990, pp. 86ff.

<sup>19</sup> E.J. Marolda, 'Wall of Steel: Sea Power and the Cold War in Asia', in *Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century. The Australian Experience*, ed. D. Stevens, St Leonards, NSW, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> N. Friedman, *The US Maritime Strategy*, London, 1988, p. 191 et pass.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Uhlig has made this point. See *How Navies Fight*, p. 241.

<sup>22</sup> Morison, 'Thoughts on Naval Strategy', pp. 62-3.

power conflict involving internal and external powers. Cultural conflict was still salient, with a classic case of cross-cultural technological transfer in Japanese adoption of Western naval hardware and ideas.<sup>23</sup>

More specifically, maritime leverage against the land (as opposed to leverage against the continent) retained its efficacy. The SLOCs were still as vital for economic life as for logistics in war. Choke points and key locations remained critical. The fall of Singapore had an historical significance beyond the loss of its strategic facilities and location to the British Empire. Naval and amphibious operations were still highly interdependent. Naval diplomacy and presence in the region arguably increased in significance, being important for both sides during the Cold War. Navies still pursued a mixture of high and low intensity operations, the latter at least in the forms of routine sea control and deterrence. Distance was still a significant strategic factor, and Japan's wide dispersal of its forces contributed to defeat.<sup>24</sup> Resources remained a fundamental regional issue. Japan went to war for resources in 1941: for the oil, tin, rubber, and rice of Southeast Asia. Regional affairs remained powerfully subject to global economic and political influences. The 'Singapore Strategy' was the fruit of overstretched British imperial resources. Singapore arguably fell *avant la lettre* in 1940, when France capitulated and Italy entered the war creating a crisis for the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean. The Asia-Pacific after 1945 was very much bound up with global Cold War politics. The cultural factor remained a significant influence upon strategy. The West underestimated the Japanese threat before World War II, largely for racial reasons.<sup>25</sup> MacArthur strengthened his argument for the use of the Philippines as a springboard against Japan, saying that to honour the commitment to their earliest liberation was essential to keeping Asian trust.<sup>26</sup>

The twentieth century has seen great changes, including technological ones. How far have they impacted on patterns of naval strategy, and their wider context, in the Asia-Pacific? One can postulate at least three major areas

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<sup>23</sup> I. Nish, 'Japan and Sea Power' in *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, Rodger, pp. 78-9, 87n.

<sup>24</sup> Signals intelligence became valuable, however, in mitigating the distance factor by helping to locate an enemy and read his intentions within the vastness of the Pacific, for example the intelligence provided to Nimitz before Midway about Yamamoto's intentions. See Uhlig, *How Navies Fight*, pp. 211, 274. This was of course to compound the enemy's own difficulties in relation to distance.

<sup>25</sup> P. Lowe, 'Great Britain's Assessment of Japan before the Outbreak of the Pacific War', in *Knowing One's Enemies. Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, ed. E.R. May, Princeton, 1984.

<sup>26</sup> Morison, 'Thoughts on Naval Strategy', p. 64.

of change: technological, political, and economic. In technological terms, the advent of oil-fuelled naval vessels underlined the importance given to bases by coal as well as the role of SLOCs for transportation of resources. In terms of the resource factor, Japan showed that oil could be, *inter alia*, a motive for war. A major technological change, the coming of air power, underlined greatly the maritime-littoral strategic environment by enhancing power projection and sea control capabilities. This was true in terms of both land-based and carrier-based air power, with many cases in point during the Pacific war. Submarines greatly improved the ability to conduct commerce war and blockade. Nuclear weaponry and power have significantly reinforced the integration of Asia-Pacific and global affairs. In political terms, Cold War bi-polar rivalry had a similar contextualising effect. The vital Sino-US relationship means that Asia-Pacific issues are still very much also global ones. Decolonisation, a major political change since 1945, has not ended the regional roles of external powers. Indeed the prosperity of the region in recent times, despite the economic crash, has been an incentive for various external states to develop stakes in the region. Decolonisation has also grafted the Western state system on to Asian societies, encouraging multilateral preoccupation with commercial interests, maritime communications, and naval rivalries. In economic terms, increasing globalisation of the world economy, with the importance of the region for international trade, has reinforced wider involvement in regional affairs. In general, twentieth century change has complicated, but not essentially altered, the naval strategic parameters of the Asia-Pacific.

There has been, however, one geopolitical development during the late twentieth century whose regional influence is still unclear, but whose eventual impact may be profound. This is the emergence of China as a unified continental power—with continental human and economic resources (and needs)—which with the collapse of the Soviet Union is now freer to turn outwards, seeking great power status in the maritime-littoral environment. Of all the changes in the twentieth century this has the greatest potential to alter the strategic configuration of the region.<sup>27</sup>

A Chinese rise to power was precluded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by internal political weakness and the intervention of foreign powers, whose technological advantages enabled penetration of the continent and dictating of terms. The communist revolution of 1949 brought

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<sup>27</sup> One might of course argue that Russia/the Soviet Union has been or is such a continental Asian power in the maritime environment. But in the post-Cold War era it is arguably more a power of the past than the future, added to which it has always been handicapped by problems of divided fleets and warm water basing. It has also been characterised by a global rather than a regional focus in the manner of China.

relative political consolidation, and China flexed its military muscles against the West during the Korean War. The Sino-Soviet split was a Western advantage during the Cold War: China was a continental distraction for the Soviets much in the way that Britain's allies were for France during earlier times, and the Soviet Union was for Germany during the Second World War. This also caused China to be preoccupied with continental defence, stationing approximately seventy divisions on the frontier by the late 1980s.<sup>28</sup> In the post-Cold War era, while Sino-Russian relations are complex they are improving, and China has a grand strategic aim of developing a blue water naval capability over the next generation—as a means towards achieving the great power status and regional influence to which it believes itself to be entitled.<sup>29</sup>

The emergence (or rather re-emergence) of Chinese continental power has been linked to the difficulties of maritime power projection against the Asian mainland during the late twentieth century. Chinese military forces were involved in Western power projection difficulties in Vietnam as well as Korea.<sup>30</sup> One consequence of the Chinese revolution was the British need to redevelop Singapore as a naval base, Hong Kong being less viable in the face of mainland power.<sup>31</sup> This was a significant reversal of the nineteenth century situation in which the treaty ports acted as Western wedges into China—a point not lost on the Chinese and their long historical memories. It also suggested the way in which continental power might affect the regional strategic trend of five hundred years: of the efficacy of maritime leverage against the land. None of this is to suggest that the possible rise of China will necessarily lead to conflict with other states in the region. We fervently hope that this will not be the case. But it is to suggest a new and complex factor to be considered in assessing the future of the Asia-Pacific.

### **Current and future issues in the light of history**

The naval strategic history of the Asia-Pacific in modern times places current issues in clearer relief. The maritime-littoral environment is still a

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<sup>28</sup> P.M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York and London, 1987, p. 451.

<sup>29</sup> You Ji, *The Armed Forces of China*, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, pp. 170, 205. Senior elements of the PLA Navy (PLAN) have recently advocated cutting the number of army divisions to assist the naval build-up. *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>30</sup> At one time over 300,000 Chinese military personnel worked in North Vietnam. Marolda, 'Wall of Steel', p.179.

<sup>31</sup> M.H. Murfett, *In Jeopardy. The Royal Navy and British Far Eastern Defence Policy 1945-1951*, Oxford, 1995, pp.154 et pass.

paramount theme, and influences the force structures of major regional powers—the US, Japan, and potentially China—and the emphasis they place on naval capabilities. The defence co-operation agreement of 1997 between the US and Japan is predominantly maritime in terms of the arrangements envisaged.<sup>32</sup> The procurement policies of other Asian states indicate a desire for naval and air forces which can offer leverage in this strategic environment.<sup>33</sup> The likely flashpoints in the region—Korea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea—imply naval and amphibious operations. The region also remains highly commercial, more so than ever, and fundamentally dependent upon sea transport for economic life. Over 70% of Japanese commercial shipping transits the South China Sea, making it one of the most sensitive strategic areas of the world. Continuing economic globalisation can only enhance the commercial and maritime nature of the region. Great powers are still pursuing rivalries, sometimes in complex ways. China favours US presence to contain Japan but not to protect Taiwan.<sup>34</sup> Cultural elements still infuse regional issues and are very salient in Chinese policy. The Peoples Republic of China (PRC) Government promotes nationalism at home, seeking political unity and control, and what are perceived as sovereign territorial rights abroad. Such attitudes are intimately linked to a sensitisation against Western imperialism dating from the First Opium War (1839-42).<sup>35</sup> This has not prevented China pursuing the traditional Asian habit of seeking to acquire external and Western military technology, encouraged by the Gulf War of 1991 and the Taiwan Strait incident of 1996. Taiwan is doing the same.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the PRC at least, this policy has deep cultural overtones: of respect for and fear of Western technical expertise which has historically been the tool of intervention against China.

More specific aspects of the current strategic scene are consistent with historical precedent. Pursuit of maritime leverage against the land is reflected in the desire of various regional states for joint and amphibious as well as

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<sup>32</sup> Press report, The Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 1997.

<sup>33</sup> J. Schofield, 'War and Punishment: the Implications of Arms Purchases in Southeast Asia', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21, 2, June 1998.

<sup>34</sup> D. Porch, 'The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy', *Naval War College Review*, LII, 3, Summer 1999, pp.35-6.

<sup>35</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, 'China: Traditional and Revolutionary Heritage' in *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, eds K. Booth and R. Trood, London, 1999, pp. 31ff.

<sup>36</sup> Jianxiang Bi, 'Managing Taiwan Operations in the Twenty-First Century: Issues and Options', *Naval War College Review*, LII, 4, Autumn 1999.

naval capabilities.<sup>37</sup> The SLOCs have great importance, suggesting the critical role which sea control and denial would play in any future regional crisis or conflict, such as a Chinese attempt to blockade Taiwan.<sup>38</sup> The Indian Ocean is still a major thoroughfare as in earlier times, largely as the oil supply route from the Gulf to East Asia and especially Japan. The projected Kia Canal through Thailand would facilitate this line of communication, although the South China Sea would remain a vital area of passage.<sup>39</sup> Such a canal, if ever built, would create another choke point. Meanwhile approximately three hundred vessels pass through the Malacca Strait every day: an average of one every five minutes. Naval diplomacy is very much alive in the region, as seen in US deployment of two carrier battle groups to the Taiwan Strait in 1996.<sup>40</sup> The combination of low and potentially high intensity naval operations is implied by a whole wider regional security agenda, taking in the policing of maritime resources, migration, contraband, and environmental issues, as well as peacekeeping. Distance is still a regional factor, reflected mainly in the US dependence on local basing for operational readiness.<sup>41</sup> A heightened regional focus on resources such as energy supplies and food is predicated on expected demographic and economic growth and the existence of maritime oil and gas deposits and fish stocks. We have seen how recent developments, such as those in the economic field, have strengthened the global context of strategic decision-making. The cultural factor still influences strategy directly. Taiwan is a flashpoint largely because in Chinese eyes it impacts upon 'the honor and humiliation of the Chinese nation'.<sup>42</sup>

The Asia-Pacific region today is thus very recognisable historically, and to understand its history is to understand the various influences which drive it

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<sup>37</sup> There is an associated interest in relevant doctrine, for example in the Australian case. See M. Evans, *The Role of the Army in a Maritime Concept of Strategy*, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Working Paper No.101, Canberra, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Porch, 'The Taiwan Strait Crisis', pp. 39-40.

<sup>39</sup> Press report, *The Sunday Times*, 9 January, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Further, in February 2000, the US deployed the carrier *Kittyhawk* to the Taiwan Strait area as tensions rose between Taiwan and China over approaching Taiwanese presidential elections. Press report, *The Weekend Australian*, 26-7 February 2000.

<sup>41</sup> S.B. Weeks and C.A. Meconis, *The Armed Forces of the USA in the Asia-Pacific Region*, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, pp. 89ff.

<sup>42</sup> M. Hsia Chang and Xiaoyu Chen, 'The Nationalist Ideology of the Chinese Military', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 21, 1, March 1998, pp. 55-6. For statements reflecting the political and cultural friction between China and Taiwan today see the article by President Lee Teng-Hui of Taiwan, 'Understanding Taiwan. Bridging the Perception Gap', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1999, and the statement issued by the mainland Taiwan Affairs Office, 'The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue', *The New York Times on the Web*, 21 February 2000.



now and may well also in the future. One might say that its historical context is increasingly important, for the region now is arguably more distinctive than ever. Europe, for example, for the first time in five centuries is not an area of major state conflict and great power rivalry, and its internal continental transport is highly efficient. These are contrasts with the contemporary Asia-Pacific.

Are there new forces working within this established strategic picture to which we should be alert? There were predictions at the end of the Cold War that the United States would progressively scale-down its forces in the region. American withdrawal from the western Pacific would bring to an end a period of almost two centuries of forward US presence in the region. This withdrawal has not occurred, nor is it likely in the foreseeable future because it is against the US national interest. The US has its primary strategic interests in East Asia. Half its trade is with or travels through the Pacific (as opposed to 20% conducted with Europe).<sup>43</sup> Its major bilateral relationship is with China, and its credibility as a great power is linked to its ability and willingness to protect Japan and South Korea and the self-determination of Taiwan (despite a declared position on one China).<sup>44</sup> US bases in the western Pacific are part of a long historical story of external presence which is unlikely to end very soon. It is sometimes observed that the post-Cold War agenda in the Asia-Pacific has redirected attention away from counter-insurgency and internal state security issues towards external affairs. This is true to a degree and is enhancing the maritime focus. Two major exceptions, however, are Indonesia and China: states for which external and maritime issues are prominent, but which also have serious problems of domestic stability which are critical for the region. There is also the developing legal issue of maritime territoriality—and of rights to economic exploitation of maritime resources—under the 1982 convention established by the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea.<sup>45</sup> Given the geography of the region and the number of states competing for use of the sea, this stands to complicate strategic affairs considerably and is already doing so. Arms purchases are also a factor with the potential to change the picture. Sustained multilateral procurement of sophisticated weaponry deployable in the maritime environment is related to

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<sup>43</sup> J.F. Sigler, 'The US Pacific Fleet into the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Opportunities', in *Sea Power in the New Century. Maritime Operations in Asia-Pacific Beyond 2000*, eds J. McCaffrie and A. Hinge, Canberra, 1998, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> Porch, 'The Taiwan Strait Crisis'. p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> See the general summary: 'The Law of the Sea', *International Institute for Strategic Studies Strategic Comments*, 5, 9, November 1999.

prosperity, competition, and uncertainty within the international community of East and Southeast Asia.<sup>46</sup>

No glance at change and the possible future can omit mention of China and its maritime ambitions, and we may make three points. First, there are at least two schools of thought on China's current and future grand strategy. One raises the alarm about Chinese hegemonic ambitions and a coming conflict with the US.<sup>47</sup> Another is more circumspect, arguing that while it presents itself as more China is at best a middle power and should be treated as such by the West.<sup>48</sup> Clearly China has an agenda for national growth and regional influence which makes it a revisionist and not a status quo power. This agenda has the potential to create regional instability and conflict. But China also has a gap, both immediate and prospective, between its ambitions and capabilities. It recently ranked seventh in terms of percentage of global gross national product, behind Italy, and faces difficulty in translating economic into military power.<sup>49</sup> Both these dimensions should be borne in mind.

Secondly, we should appreciate the nature of Chinese sea power. China's desire for blue water naval status is not a solely military power play in the manner of Russian or German sea power, but part of a broadly maritime agenda based upon perceptions of national growth and resource needs. It is also linked to the existence of a growing Chinese coastal economy, and to an understanding that China sits on the doorstep of a maritime environment. There is, however, a powerful military dimension to Chinese navalism, reflecting the knowledge that great power status requires formidable military force. In today's currency that includes a submarine-based nuclear strike capability, which China is seeking to develop.<sup>50</sup> Geographically, China does not have the French and Russian problem of divided fleets. It does, however, like most other continental powers, have land frontiers to secure if necessary by force, notably the Sino-Indian border.<sup>51</sup> As was demonstrated during the Second World War (when Japanese sea power forced China to be supplied from Burma), and as the Peoples Liberation Army (Navy) (PLAN) commander

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<sup>46</sup> This is a trend which can be traced back to the 1970s. J.S. Breemer, 'Sea Power in the New Century' in McCaffrie and Hinge, *Sea Power in the New Century*, p.11.

<sup>47</sup> R. Bernstein and R.H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China*, New York, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> G. Segal, 'Does China Matter?', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Segal, 'Does China Matter?', p. 25; Jianxiang Bi, 'Managing Taiwan Operations', p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> You Ji, *Armed Forces of China*, p. 97.

<sup>51</sup> M. Hsia Chang and Xiaoyu Chen, 'Nationalist Ideology of the Chinese Military', pp. 57-8.

Liu Huaqing stated in 1989, China is both a continental and maritime state.<sup>52</sup> If it should logically straddle both environments, it is also eligible for the Mahanian dilemma of divided resources.<sup>53</sup> Is Chinese naval power being built as a defensive or offensive weapon? Arguably the former, since Chinese planners see attacks on their coasts as conceivable in the future.<sup>54</sup> China remembers Western attacks from the sea in the nineteenth century. But Chinese naval doctrine has a Soviet ancestry, emphasising forward defence.<sup>55</sup> It also relates to perceived sovereign rights over Taiwan and the South China Sea. The best public information is that the PLAN envisages its chief missions as defence and disruption of SLOCs, amphibious operations against islands, and deterrence, as well as diplomacy.<sup>56</sup> Other regional states can thus interpret China's naval strategy as offensive.

Thirdly, Chinese strategic philosophy appears adaptable to the maritime-littoral environment of the Asia-Pacific. While a debate is apparently taking place within the Chinese military over the utility of Eastern and Western ways of war,<sup>57</sup> and while China seeks to acquire high technology weaponry, the principles of *Wei-chi*—the ancient game of strategy involving building spheres of influence—are apparently being applied in Southeast Asia.<sup>58</sup> This is supported by the publicly reported but little discussed fact that in late 1999 China announced its intention of sending one thousand unarmed police to join the new United Nations peacekeeping force in East Timor.<sup>59</sup>

As various trends develop in the region, its history will be valuable in measuring change and continuity, and in analysing the complex interaction of past legacies, regional and global influences, and multilateral aspirations. Two parting shots: the current vogue for power projection from the sea is highly

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> There is a potential parallel between Chinese and South Asian naval aspirations in terms of continental and maritime issues. See J. Goldrick, *No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka 1945-1996*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 200-1. Indeed India's announcement of its intention to hold naval exercises in the South China Sea in late 2000 widens the area of its maritime rivalry with China already evident in the Andaman Sea. 'India Challenges China in the South China Sea', *Stratfor.Com Global Intelligence Update*, 26 April, 2000: <http://www.stratfor.com/>

<sup>54</sup> J.W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *China's Strategic Seapower: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age*, Stanford, 1994, pp. 229-30.

<sup>55</sup> You Ji, *Armed Forces of China*, pp. 164ff.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 180ff.

<sup>57</sup> Press report, *The Washington Post*, 8 August, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> G.S. Capen, 'Wei-chi: The Game of War', *USNI Proceedings*, August 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Australian press reports, late 1999.

relevant to the region, but so too is the enabling factor of blue water sea control. Easily taken for granted in the post-Cold War world, a pre-requisite (as in the past) for joint operations and control of SLOCs, sea control is likely to be contested in a regional crisis or conflict. In this context, rumours of the death of the surface warship, circulating for a century, are likely to be greatly exaggerated. Further, the globalising and maritime world of the new millennium may be the Mahanian dream scenario, but the strategist for the Asia-Pacific is likely to be Corbett (granted that the choice is never really either/or). The issues of local sea control, sea communications, and power projection make him the man for the job, and should continue the recent business of rescuing him from the near-tragic fate of being a man born out of his time.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See also G. Till, 'Sir Julian Corbett and the Twenty-First Century: Ten Maritime Commandments' in *The Changing Face of Maritime Power*, eds A. Dorman, M.L. Smith and M.R.H. Uttley, London, 1999.