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14. ABSTRACT

Two principle concepts for the employment of naval power draw upon the writings of Mahan and Corbett. Mahan focuses on the concept of a decisive, large-scale engagement and the need to be strong a the culminating point of victory. Corbett on the other hand favors local control of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and projection of maritime power onto land. During the Pacific war, the U.S. Navy employed a Corbettian strategy in its campaign across the Pacific to Japan, as evidenced by submarine operations, amphibious warfare and the use of airpower. The U.S. Navy did not seek the decisive engagement, nor was such an engagement necessary to achieve victory over the Imperial Japanese Navy. What was important was control over local SLOCs for the purposes of 1) inserting Marines over the beach and supporting them after landing, 2) preventing Japanese forces from doing the same for their forces, and 3) preventing Japan from using its own SLOCs to move troops and materiel throughout the empire. This essay examines key points to demonstrate why the U.S. strategy was Corbettian and not Mahanian.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

Mahan; Corbett; Pacific war; U.S. Navy; airpower; amphibious warfare; Imperial Japanese Navy; Guadalcanal; submarine warfare

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U.S. Maritime Strategy in the Pacific War

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Introduction

Mahan advocated dominance of one naval fleet over another and emphasized the need for operations aimed at destroying the enemy fleet in a decisive engagement[1]. To operate as Mahan indicated required concentration of fleet forces at a culminating point(s), to seek a decisive engagement, ultimately leaving one naval fleet dominant throughout the area/region. Corbett advocated the importance of effecting passage through a particular region of the sea and/or denying such passage to your opponent, and placed emphasis on controlling sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for/against shipping in general as well as force projection over the beach[1]. Corbett was less interested in a decisive engagement leading to overall dominance and more interested in control over an area as long as was needed for whatever operation a fleet was engaged in.

During the Pacific war, the U.S. did not seek large decisive fleet engagement(s) whose purpose was to destroy the Japanese fleet to establish dominance of the sea, at least initially. This was partially due to necessity. Early in the Pacific war, the U.S. Pacific fleet simply didn't have the strength to go toe-to-toe with the Japanese and win until 1943 when U.S. industrial output started to become decisive. Rather, the U.S. sought to control passage through certain areas, either to deny passage to Japanese shipping in general (naval or merchant), and/or to project power ashore through the insertion of amphibious forces. Thus, sea power in U.S. operations during the Pacific War were Corbettian rather than Mahanian. This is evidenced by three primary examples. First was commerce raiding as practiced by the U.S. Navy's (USN's) submarine fleet. This economic warfare denied, or at least partially denied Japan the use of its shipping lanes, and eventually helped to starve the Japanese economy. A second example was the use of amphibious operations to project Marines over the beach with integrated surface and

air power. Such operations require local control of the sea, but do not require large scale control of the sea, and were an integral part of the USN's island hopping campaign. A final point is that the decisive factor in sea control during the Pacific war was control of the sky. Surface combatants were important, but it was aviation that was the decisive factor in controlling local SLOCs.

Economic warfare

Following Pearl Harbor, the U.S. submarine fleet was directed to conduct unrestricted warfare on Japanese shipping[2]. The strategic aim was to undermine the Japanese ability to ship materiel, finished goods, resources and troops within the empire. The effects of the campaign were cumulative. As submarine patrols spent more and more time on patrol deep in Japanese waters with the result that increasing amounts of merchant marine shipping were destroyed. As the Japanese lost increasing merchant tonnage, it became more and more difficult to transport troops and materiel throughout the empire. As the submarine campaign progressed, Japanese shipping took to hugging coastlines, and even attempted to ship men and materiel overland to avoid USN submarine patrols. Thus, the Japanese had been partially denied the use of their SLOCs, and without a decisive engagement between the USN and the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). No one USN submarine action was responsible for denying the Japanese passage through their SLOCs, with the effects increasing over time.

Submarine warfare in general does not translate well into Mahanian terms, as to concentrate a submarine fleet in one place for a decisive engagement would likely negate the flexibility and stealth that are the hallmarks of the platform. The submarine campaign against Japanese shipping was decidedly Corbettian. The economic warfare being waged on Japan's industrial base was affected to deny passage to Japanese merchant shipping and control of

Japanese SLOCs rather than targeting the IJN fleet in decisive battle. By the end of the war, U.S. submarines had sunk ~4.8 million tons of merchant shipping, and helped reduce the flow of men and materiel to and from Japan to a trickle[3]. It has been estimated that submarine warfare alone may have been able to starve Japan into submission, although it likely would have required a much longer time scale. These observations help to demonstrate that the USN didn't seek a decisive engagement with the Japanese fleet but rather restricted Japan's movement along their SLOCs by interdicting their shipping. This is exactly as Corbett would prescribe.

It could be argued that by focusing on IJN ships rather than merchant ships that the submarine patrols could have effected a similar level of control in a more Mahanian fashion. Essentially, destroy the one and you will dominate the other. However, this was not nearly as effective a use of submarines as targeting merchant shipping. This was evidenced by the Japanese who targeted USN surface ships almost exclusively and had a much lower impact on U.S. shipping during the Pacific war. Subs were less important to USN efforts against the IJN in direct confrontation. Not to say that USN submariners didn't or couldn't sink IJN ships, they could and did. However this was not their primary objective, and had USN submarines operated more along the lines of Mahan, by attempting to destroy the enemy fleet, they would have been far less successful.

Assault from the sea

Mahan favored large scale surface engagements to leave one fleet dominant over the other, as discussed above. While it may have somewhat reduced the risk to USMC landings to have destroyed the IJN prior to beginning amphibious assault of various islands, such a decisive engagement was not likely to favor the U.S. until later in the war. Japan had the advantage early on in the number, quality and firepower of their gunships and aviation assets. While the USN

would have inflicted significant damage on the IJN, it is likely that early in the war, the IJN would have won a large-scale surface engagement, potentially knocking the USN out of the fight for several months while a new fleet was being built. This would certainly have delayed the Marine Corps' advance through the Pacific islands, and was not necessary as total maritime dominance is not needed for amphibious insertions.

What was needed for amphibious operations was local control of ingress and egress routes crossing the sea. By gaining local control of SLOCs, through a combination of air and surface power, the U.S. was able to insert Marines over the beach while denying Japan the ability to reinforce or resupply their own troops defending the Pacific islands. When the USN was sending Marines onto Guadalcanal, or Iwo Jima, or any other island, it didn't matter what the IJN was doing around China, or in the Aleutians or anywhere else the IJN was located that wasn't close enough to the targeted island to either prevent the Marines from landing and resupplying or to enable the same for Japanese troops. So long as the USN controlled the SLOCs near where the Marines were landing, that was sufficient for the operation at hand.

Guadalcanal makes for a good example that local control of SLOCs was the primary aim and requirement for landing Marines. Although far from perfect, due to the relative newness of the amphibious doctrine in use, Guadalcanal nonetheless demonstrates that local control of the sea is what matters during amphibious operations. Whoever was more successful at controlling the SLOCs around Guadalcanal was more successful at reinforcing/resupplying their troops on Guadalcanal. Sinking an IJN ship or taking an airfield hundreds of miles away was not going to impact the outcome of the Marines' landing. In general, at least early on, the U.S. was more successful by day and the Japanese by night. As the U.S. improved its night tactics and better perfected amphibious doctrine, the Japanese were less and less successful at resupplying and

reinforcing their troops on Guadalcanal. There were surface engagements between the two fleets as each tried to deny the other control of SLOCs around the island. However, none of these engagements were decisive, individually or in total, and control tended to go back and forth throughout the campaign. The losses the Japanese incurred around Guadalcanal were not decisive immediately, they were cumulatively decisive through the process of attrition started at Midway and which continued through the end of the war.

The USN was never able to completely control the SLOCs around Guadalcanal, as evidenced by the evacuation of Japanese troops in early February over several nights, but this does not change the fact that amphibious operations to seize and control Guadalcanal were still effective, despite a lack of total control of the sea beyond the immediate vicinity. Despite lacking this level of control, the U.S. was able to effectively reinforce and resupply the Marines that were on the island in sufficient measure to support the assault. The Marines on Guadalcanal did have two distinct advantages, they controlled Henderson field and had better intelligence on Japanese operations, making it increasingly dangerous for the IJN within about 150 miles of Guadalcanal[4]. The only airstrip closer was 600 miles away at Rabaul, near the limit for Japanese aircraft[5]. Had the U.S. gone through New Guinea and taken Rabaul as MacArthur had wanted[6] it would not have made a significant difference at Guadalcanal as U.S. aircraft launched from Rabaul to Guadalcanal would have done no better than the Japanese had. This underscores the point that local control of SLOCs and not distant operations were what was important for amphibious operations. Amphibious operations during the island-hopping campaign were thus Corbettian in nature.

Airpower

The truly decisive element in the Pacific war was airpower. This is evidenced by the observation that towards the end of the war, the USN was fielding multi-carrier task forces capable of launching up to 1,000 aircraft at a time[7]. Had large scale surface engagements with guns been more beneficial to securing control of SLOCs, it is logical to conclude that the U.S. would have scaled back carrier and aircraft construction in favor of battleships and similar big gun ships. Although still a relatively new technology, aviation quickly became a decisive force in the Pacific war.

Corbett would have recognized and approved of the U.S. aerial approach towards controlling the sea lanes. While never capable of decisively destroying the IJN in a single engagement, U.S. aviation was able to interdict and fight Japanese forces, wearing them down through attrition and controlling the SLOCs within aircraft patrol areas. The importance of local control of the air was evidenced at Guadalcanal, where Japanese aircraft launched at extreme range from Rabaul some 600 miles away were of minimal impact on Marine operations on Guadalcanal. The USN was much more effective at controlling the local airspace to both control local SLOCs and provide close air support to the Marines on the island. By the end of the war, whoever ruled the sky over the area of operations was ultimately able to effect significant levels of control over local sea lanes, a fact that remains operationally relevant to this day. Further evidence of the importance of airpower over big guns was that Yamamoto's primary targets at both Pearl Harbor and Midway were not U.S. battleships, but rather U.S. carriers. Were the carriers of lesser importance, Yamamoto would not have risked what he did in either operation to take out the USN's carriers, he would have favored a more traditional gun battle with the USN's gunships.

Another important factor in the air war over the Pacific was the use of aerial mining by the U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC), which almost completely shut down what Japanese shipping the USN submarines had not destroyed. By repeatedly mining key points of transit, both ports and SLOCs, the USAAC was able to effect increasingly greater levels of control on the movement of Japanese ships, naval and merchant. Although initially reluctant to commit aircraft to the mining operation, the USAAC quickly realized the potential and devoted increasing numbers of aircraft to the operation[7]. The harbors and sea lanes were so heavily mined that ships simply could not enter or leave port without running significant risk of striking a mine and sinking either in port or while transiting between ports. This gave a substantial level of control over Japanese SLOCs, with little to no effort by USN surface forces. Submarines could lay mines, but could carry only a limited number of mines with significant time in between mining runs. Aerial mining on the other hand could make run after run with short turn arounds between drops and with multiple aircraft. The impact of aerial mining was so important that it remains a key mission of USN Maritime Patrol squadrons to this day.

Counterargument

Possibly the best argument against the U.S. following a Corbettian strategy rather than a Mahanian strategy in the Pacific war was Midway. As demonstrated by Operation Plan No. 29-42 and signed by Nimitz himself, the USN was directed to Midway with the intention of engaging the IJN in a major battle[8]. The U.S. ships at Midway were assembled from throughout the Pacific, and while it was not the whole of the U.S. Pacific fleet, it did include all of the only USN elements in the Pacific that mattered at Midway, their carriers. The resulting battle was a comparatively large-scale fleet engagement.

The Japanese plan to lure the U.S. fleet into an engagement, destroy it and force the U.S. to negotiate was decidedly Mahanian. However, even if Japan had succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, the battle would have hardly been decisive as the U.S. had an even bigger fleet under construction where Japan couldn't reach, and that would start to be delivered in short order. On the other hand, destruction of the Japanese fleet in a single decisive battle was never the intended U.S. goal at Midway, although subsequent USN operations would have benefitted had USN forces at Midway destroyed the IJN ships intent on capturing the island. The goal was to hold Midway and exact heavy attrition on the Japanese, risking U.S. ships only where there was a good chance of inflicting more damage on the Japanese than the Japanese could inflict on the U.S., as opposed to actively seeking a decisive engagement[9]. This is not a Mahanian strategy, but a strategically defensive strategy of attrition intended to wear down an opponent but still allow operationally offensive sorties to be pursued. In short, a Corbettian strategy.

In addition, at Midway and throughout the Pacific war, surface fleet engagements were not decided primarily by gun battles, they were primarily decided by airpower. Although the battle of Midway was able to deliver a major loss to IJN carrier aviation from which it never recovered, the battle was hardly decisive. The U.S. gained control of the SLOCs around Midway without even engaging the lion's share of the IJN fleet. Indeed, the bulk of Yamamoto's surface forces were out of range and unavailable during the battle, thus never taking part in it. At Midway it was aircraft, not gun battles, which sank four IJN carriers. Air power could command the local region, but neither side had the airpower to completely dominate the entire ocean at any time during the war. Any victories were local, and related to control of the immediate area to support the passage of surface shipping through that area or deny it to the Japanese. While it is true that the fleets were engaged on a relatively large scale, Midway was not a decisive fleet

engagement but rather an air engagement regarding sea control, exactly what Corbett would advocate.

Conclusion

U.S. operations in the Pacific war followed a Corbettian strategy rather than a Mahanian strategy. The U.S. did not seek a decisive engagement with the IJN, and it was not necessary to do so. Initially, the USN was likely not strong enough to go toe-to-toe with the IJN and come out on top. Later in the war it simply wasn't necessary, as the U.S. could readily gain control over whatever SLOCs it chose, through a combination of surface, subsurface and aviation assets. The submarine and aerial mining campaigns employed by the USN and USAAC, respectively, also serve to underscore control of SLOCs. Even deep in enemy territory, submarines were able to exact a significant toll on Japanese shipping and had substantial control over the movement of Japanese shipping by the end of the war. This was accomplished without the need for a decisive engagement between the USN and the IJN. Aerial mining operations, which were critical to tightening U.S. control over Japanese SLOCs were accomplished without significant destruction of IJN ships by the aircraft engaged in mining operations. Dominating the IJN may have made the aerial mining easier by removing a potential surface-to-air defense platform, as well as removing a source of mine removal, but it was not necessary to the aerial mining campaign.

When it comes to naval warfare, Mahan is really talking about how to become a maritime power by growing your fleet during peacetime and dominating in wartime, but Corbett talks about how to actually use that power effectively to control SLOCs and project force over the beach[1]. Complete dominance over an enemy fleet may be desirable, but it's not necessary to effect control over the SLOCs you wish to use. As demonstrated at Guadalcanal, even relatively nearby islands such as New Guinea were of minimal impact on control of SLOCs at

Guadalcanal. Although the IJN surface fleet did score significant hits on the USN at Guadalcanal, and were able to maintain some control of the SLOCs, particularly at night, no surface engagement was decisive and no engagement established fleet dominance on either side. What mattered at Guadalcanal and other islands as the U.S. progressed through the Pacific, was control of SLOCs for the time necessary to conduct desired operations or prevent the other side from doing the same. Air power was a decisive factor at Guadalcanal, the USN largely had control of the airspace around the island, and the Japanese were never able to significantly threaten that control, which degraded their ability to control the SLOCs around the island. This remained true for other islands as the U.S. progressed towards Japan. Even the *kamikaze*, and the sometimes devastating consequences of *kamikaze* attacks, were unable to wrest control of either the airspace or the SLOCs from the U.S. As the U.S. progressed towards Japan, there was certainly a point where the U.S. had effectively become dominant over the Japanese fleet, but this was not a Mahanian result. Rather, it was the result of attrition through a series of progressive operations and local control of desired sea lines of communication, employing a Corbettian strategy.

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