

America's Maritime Power Self-Restriction in its Conflicts with China



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14. ABSTRACT The US was unable to defeat China because it self-restricted its maritime power abilities and coalitions while engaging in a limited war against an enemy with unlimited aims. America's "warm war" with the CCP and the PRC was marked by intermittent periods of ideological struggles, proxy wars, and full-on battles. The conflict was lost through America's inability to follow Britain's maritime power success. Unlike the UK, the US did not fully embrace the land and diplomatic minor strategies laid out by Julian Corbett, nor did America form cohesive coalitions like their British predecessors. The costliest US fault, compared to the UK's merit, was the nation's asymmetric aims and means compared to those of its adversary; America's (undue) fear of escalation with the USSR precluded the US from defeating a PRC seeking unlimited aims with unlimited means. Some may argue that the US was not defeated by China since America met all but one of its stated objectives; however, this assumes the US objectives were aligned with its long-term national security interests, which they were not.					
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Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) thwarted revolutionary France by fully synchronizing its capabilities as a dominant maritime power and its use of coalitions to utilize unlimited means to achieve unlimited aims. The United States (US), on the other hand, was unable to defeat China because it self-restricted its maritime power abilities and coalitions while engaging in a limited war against an enemy with unlimited aims. America's "warm war" with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) was marked by intermittent periods of ideological struggles, proxy wars, and full-on battles. The conflict, itself nested in the greater Cold War and overlapped with the Korean War, was lost through America's inability to follow Britain's maritime power success. Unlike the UK, the US did not fully embrace the land and diplomatic minor strategies laid out by Julian Corbett, nor did America form cohesive coalitions like their British predecessors. The costliest US fault, compared to the UK's merit, was the nation's asymmetric aims and means compared to those of its adversary; America's (undue) fear of escalation with the Soviet Union (USSR) precluded the US from defeating a PRC seeking unlimited aims with unlimited means. Some may argue that the US was not defeated by China since America met all but one of its stated objectives; however, this assumes the US objectives were aligned with its long-term national security interests, which they were not.

Fighting as a Corbettian Maritime Power

The UK effectively utilized Julian Corbett's theory of major strategy for a dominant maritime power during their war with France by applying the theory's four minor strategies. The US, itself a dominant maritime power, struggled to apply Corbett's theory in a meaningful and synchronous way during their conflict with China. Corbett's major strategy is predicated on attaining command of sea and includes four interrelated minor strategies of naval, economic,

diplomatic, and land.¹ Coalitions, a chief component of Corbett's diplomatic strategy, will be expounded upon later in its own context.

The British naval strategy established command of the sea after crucial victories in the English Channel, West Indies, and the Mediterranean and allowed the UK to control critical sea lines of communication.² These successes placed pressure on Napoleon's Continental System, which weakened France's partnerships and ability to conduct a protracted war, and enabled Britain's capacity to finance additional naval assets, land forces, and coalition costs.³ The UK utilized its diplomatic strategy to form and fund coalitions⁴ with continental powers that would be able to provide vast forces against Napoleon's eastern front. Lastly, Britain's land strategy of using a disposal force from the sea in a peripheral theater to advance the objectives of an unlimited war⁵ was very successful. The Peninsular War was decisive in the UK and her allies winning the overall conflict against France; the campaign debilitated the French capacity for waging war and demonstrated firm resolve to Britain's coalition partners who were unsure of the nation's commitment. The UK was able to use each pillar of Corbett's theory interrelatedly and to the maximum extent available, but the US did not similarly comport itself.

The US only utilized its naval strategy and, to a limited extent, its economic strategy in countering the rise of the CCP during the Chinese Civil War; America did not adequately support a diplomatic or land strategy. Although the US was able to maintain its command of the sea and finance its other strategies, controlling sea lines of communication had limited effect on a revolutionary land army based in rural areas and non-dependent on trade. Diplomatically, the

¹ Kevin McCranie, "Corbett and Maritime Strategy" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, March 25, 2022).

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Inst. Pr, 1988), 61.

US did establish a coalition with Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government, the Kuomintang (KMT), through military supplies, funding, and training;⁶ however, this partnership was damaged by a lack of support and disparate desired end states. Additionally, George Marshall's decision to reject US forces' deployment during the fight for Manchuria, based on the fear of reducing focus and resources from the European theater,⁷ discounted the land strategy of a dominant maritime power. The US could have utilized a disposal force to tip the scales in Chiang's favor at a critical juncture in the fight with the CCP.

The US better utilized its naval and economic strategies in the Korean War but still failed to fully utilize its diplomatic and land strategies to their full extent. Naval strategy was used effectively in maintaining American command of the sea and protecting the KMT by securing the Taiwan Strait,⁸ while economically, the US threatened to halt financial assistance to states selling "war-related materials to Communist nations" in order to pressure the United Nations (UN) into implementing a fuel, arms, and ammunition embargo on China.⁹ Diplomatically, the US did build and support a UN coalition against communist aggression and expansion into South Korea. However, this united front did show internal fractures concerning the coalition's desired end state and shared sacrifices. Finally, the US did not impose a land strategy of a disposal force after its initial success at Incheon. The decision to avoid further amphibious operations north of the 38th parallel was undertaken out of fear that escalation with China would limit military resources in a European security incident or draw the US into a direct military confrontation with the USSR.¹⁰ The fear of potential escalation may have been a valid reason to avoid such a land

⁶ S. C. M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 234-235.

⁷ Ernest R. May, "1947-48: When Marshall Kept the US Out of War in China," *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 4 (Oct, 2002), 1009.

⁸ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 98.

⁹ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 131-133.

¹⁰ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 124.

strategy but perhaps undue; defending the PRC against the US with full military escalation would not be in the USSR's national interest. Unlike Britain, America's deliberate effort to not fully embrace the advantages afforded to a superior maritime power proved to be ineffective at defeating a continental power. The US evading its full capabilities was further exacerbated by its inability to form successful coalitions.

Fighting Amongst a Coalition

Strong coalitions are integral to maritime power victory against a continental power. The UK's successful later coalitions faced inferior French ones, while the US, whose coalitions with Chiang Kai-Shek, South Korea (ROK), and the UN had shortcomings, battled a robust partnership between the PRC, North Korea (DPRK), and USSR. Effective coalitions create synergies amongst allies to achieve better end states by utilizing cohesive "glues" such as following common goals and sharing contributions. Ineffective coalitions can lead to defeat in short-term battles and long-term strategic competitions and are exhibited by corrosive "solvents," including a lack of shared sacrifice and disparate goals.

The coalitions led by the UK against France were not always successful, but they were iterative; each successive coalition enhanced glues and mitigated or averted potential solvents. Britain's later alliances were marked by: aligning goals, such as following the Trachtenberg Plan and deposing Napoleon; sharing resources, including £26 million in subsidies between 1813-1815 alone;¹¹ and having "skin in the game," most notably demonstrated by Britain's multi-year efforts and subsequent success in the Peninsular War. Concurrently, Britain was facing a French coalition based on fear, force, and family. Napoleon's allies were nations compelled by loose post-hostility treaties or conquered states led by his kin. Each French ally was driven by

¹¹ Michael Duffy, "British Policy in the War against Revolutionary France," in *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda*, ed. Colin James (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), 19.

different desired end states and was only willing to go along with French hegemony as long as the emperor could feasibly maintain it. When Napoleon's empire faced accumulating setbacks, the solvents of his coalition hindered France's ability to keep the fight going, enabling Britain and its allies to win the war.

The US-led coalitions against the PRC did improve over time but were never able to amass the same level of glues as the UK did against France. During the Chinese Civil War, the US coalition with the KMT failed to provide reliable support to Chiang Kai-Shek's forces or establish common goals and was impaired due to historic Chinese sensitivity to outside intervention.¹² American leaders sabotaged their efforts by providing lackluster combat training, cutting off financial aid for eight months, and forcibly pushing Chiang to unify his dissimilar forces, which led to warlord defections to the CCP.¹³ Additionally, Marshall's drive for a negotiated settlement to establish a shared-power coalition government¹⁴ did nothing to improve the tenuous partnership. A brokered deal with the CCP was at odds with Chiang's desired end state of a unified, nationalist China. This ideological difference proved to be a powerful solvent in the partnership. Similarly, US/UN forces and the ROK had divergent views (save for MacArthur's early drive to the Yalu River) on unification until the very end of the conflict, as shown in President Rhee's subversion of the final armistice by releasing 25,000 prisoners to "resist" non-unification.¹⁵ Also, any push by America to escalate beyond holding the 38th parallel would require backing from its European allies, who were fearful of over-committing themselves outside of Europe and unlikely to give their approval.¹⁶ America's coalition solvents

¹² Jason Kelly, "Civil War in a Failed State: China 1921-1950" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 14, 2022).

¹³ Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949*, 248, 251, 257.

¹⁴ May, "1947-48," 1008.

¹⁵ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 176.

¹⁶ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 158.

were made worse by its adversary's cohesive partnerships, most glaringly during the Korean War.

The PRC's coalition with the USSR and DPRK highlighted many glues that the UK enjoyed in their conflict with France. All three communist nations shared a political ideology that assisted in aligning their goals: countering imperialism/capitalism, advancing “continuous revolution,” and creating an “intermediate zone” of socialist power in East Asia.¹⁷ This coalition also was able to share needed resources: the CCP sent over 250,000 troops to save the DPRK from destruction during the US/UN forces' drive north, with the understanding that the USSR would provide ammunition, military equipment, and air defense, both on the battlefield and over Chinese cities if need be.¹⁸ Lastly, the PRC and DPRK displayed shared sacrifice; China was enthusiastic to risk its nation's existence to fight the world's foremost economic and military power if it meant advancing the global communist movement. This joint effort, although approached by the PRC and DPRK with self-serving motives,¹⁹ provided the glue for a successful coalition. Whereas the UK's and China's coalitions fought together with common goals, the US and its allies were fighting on two disparate levels of war.

Fighting with Asymmetric Aims

America's decision to fight limited wars against the PRC placed the nation at an eternal disadvantage and inability to win versus a China with unlimited aims, which is contrast with Britain's decision to engage in a co-unlimited war against France. Clausewitz advised that a nation determine the political objective and the value of that object prior to embarking upon a

¹⁷ Chen, *Mao's China*, 5-7.

¹⁸ Chen, *Mao's China*, 55-59.

¹⁹ Chen, *Mao's China*, 88-89.

war, which would lead to a decision on how much and how long to fight to meet that objective.²⁰

While the US did this internal assessment, it failed to heed Sun Tzu's warning to "know the enemy and know yourself"²¹ and complete a net assessment on the part of the PRC.

Asymmetries in the identification and valuation of objectives and means can be exploited to the ultimate benefit of one side throughout a conflict.

In the later years of their conflict with France, the UK solidified its ultimate desired end state as one in which Napoleon was removed from power, and the French Empire ceased to exist in its current form. This unlimited objective was matched by the UK's willingness to sacrifice unlimited means to bring it to fruition, as can be seen by their efforts to significantly expand their land forces on the continent in the Peninsular War and increase the vast amounts of funding for the final coalitions.²² France was also fighting with an unlimited objective, the existence of the empire itself, and was determined to utilize all means available until it could no longer carry on. Britain's recognition to shift from a limited conflict on the peripheries to an unlimited war of attrition with their allies eventually wore down France and achieved victory, which was in stark contrast to the limited approach taken by the US.

The US was fighting a limited war with an enemy fighting an unlimited one. The US during the Cold War, as elucidated first by George Kennan and later and more aggressively by Paul Nitze, sought to contain and eventually defeat Soviet communism on all ideological, economic, and military fronts²³ over the long term. However, the US failed to provide a similar level of determination in its "warm war" with China and the Korean War because an escalation

²⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 92, 579.

²¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), III:31.

²² Michael Duffy, "British Policy in the War against Revolutionary France," in *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda*, ed. Colin James (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), 19.

²³ Michael Dennis, "War Termination: Creation of a New International Order" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 8, 2022).

in these conflicts could place America's unlimited objectives in the Cold War in jeopardy. The limited American objective in the "warm war" is not immediately apparent, but it was clearly not the eradication of the PRC through regime change; if so, the US would have dedicated far more resources and forces to assisting the KMT. It can be assumed that the main aim was a lesser version of the Soviet containment policy, one which would not be forced with all means available to the US. America's political aims in the Korean War were to protect the ROK and Japan, prove commitment to NATO, further contain the PRC, and, depending on which point in the conflict, unify Korea.²⁴ The means required to meet these objectives were limited; all but the unification piece could be accomplished as long as the US provided as much pressure on the PRC and DPRK as necessary to keep the status quo ante. US aims and means stand in stark contrast to those of the PRC in both overlapping conflicts.

The PRC was broadly fighting a limitless ideological war to "never forget the national humiliation [and] revitalize the great Chinese nation."²⁵ In its "warm war" against the US, the PRC was fighting an unlimited war to advance the revolutionary proletariat, rid East Asia of imperialist threats, and internally secure the CCP's existence.²⁶ The "Great Movement to Resist America and Assist Korea" also began with unlimited aims, including unification under the DPRK and expulsion of all US forces from Korea and Taiwan.²⁷ The PRC was willing and able to utilize unlimited means to reach these aims, including massive troop levels and paying for continuing materiel support from the USSR; the PRC was prepared to last as long as possible, as is evident in their assertion to "continue to fight with the Korean people to the end"²⁸ as late as

²⁴ Nicholas Sarantakes, "The Korean War-A Strategic Overview" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 15, 2022).

²⁵ Andrew Wilson, "China's Century of Humiliation" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 14, 2022).

²⁶ Chen, *Mao's China*, 5-7, 10-11.

²⁷ Chen, *Mao's China*, 88-89.

²⁸ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 173.

1953. The asymmetry between the combatants meant the US could never defeat the PRC, given each's political objectives and what they were willing to sacrifice for them.

“Mission Accomplished”?

Some argue that the US was not defeated by the PRC and that the Korean conflict was actually "a successful Corbettian operation in [a] secondary theater"²⁹ since America technically achieved the vast majority of its objectives. During this period, the US was able to stem the spread of Sino-communism throughout the rest of East Asia and had strained the relationship between the PRC and the USSR, including through mandatory re-payments of Korean War debts, which resulted in mass death and economic hindrances.³⁰ Fighting the PRC in China was never a US goal; it was “the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time,”³¹ so how could avoiding that not be a win for the US? Additionally, the US was able to achieve all its political objectives in the Korean War, save for unification, which as has been pointed out, was a loose aim that "gyrated in response to developments on the battlefield."³² However, just because the US may have met its asserted goals does not mean the nation won the conflict, especially in the long-term strategic sense.

America's political objectives in the “warm” and Korean Wars were clouded by the fear of escalation and led to misaligned, risk-averse, and short-sighted aims. These limited goals were not appropriately aligned with America's long-term national security interests and hence cannot be considered a "win" for the US. Given that the unlimited aims of the over-arching Cold War were to stem Soviet influence and power in every way possible and that the nested conflicts

²⁹ Sarantakes, “The Korean War”

³⁰ Sally Paine, "Mao as a Strategist and a Strategic Leader" (lecture, US Naval War College, Newport, RI, April 15, 2022).

³¹ Sarantakes, “The Korean War”

³² Hunt, "Beijing and the Korean Crisis," 474.

themselves were the ways and means of attaining said aims, how could the goals of the lesser wars be to "not lose" them?

America's risk-aversion partially stemmed from a fear of expending resources against the USSR outside of the European theater.³³ This is a valid concern that should be taken seriously; however, the Soviets did not display any actions that indicated they would directly engage US forces. Stalin was "determined... to avoid direct military confrontation with the US"³⁴ and did not provide all the forces and materials requested from Mao throughout the conflicts. Eisenhower himself "did not believe that if we became engaged in rather a bitter fight along the coast of China, Russia would want to intervene with her own forces."³⁵ The President's actions late in the Korean War bore this out, as his overtures of escalation in North Korea and Taiwan³⁶ finally drove the Soviets to recommend that the PRC sign the armistice.

Lastly, the US was short-sighted in its view that an escalating war with China would place US and NATO security interests at risk in Europe. This assertion presupposes that the US barely had enough Air Force and Army resources for European contingencies, like the Berlin Airlift, which would be exacerbated by increasing operations in China or North Korea.³⁷ However, the US could have utilized the Navy's air, amphibious, and sea power without significantly straining European resources, primarily if the combat power was used in conjunction with Chinese nationalists, as the PRC had ongoing concerns about counter-revolutionaries at home.³⁸ Had the US resolved itself to really win versus China, the USSR

³³ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 124.

³⁴ Chen, *Mao's China*, 55.

³⁵ Sarantakes, "The Korean War"

³⁶ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 174.

³⁷ May, "1947-48," 1009-1010.

³⁸ Hunt, "Beijing and the Korean Crisis," 471.

would have been surrounded on its eastern flank and allowed the US and its allies to entirely focus on European concerns.

Conclusion

The UK achieved victory over France because it maximized its advantages as an established maritime power by utilizing all four Corbettian minor strategies in-sync with a strong coalition and appropriately aligned aims and means. The US was unable to triumph over China because the fear of escalation to direct conflict with the USSR impeded the nation's capacity for setting and attaining unlimited objectives with the requisite ways and means. This anxiety also prevented America from effecting a land strategy with a proper disposal force and precluded the US from forming and maintaining cohesive coalitions that create true synergies. Although some contend that the US did not "lose" its conflict with China in the first decade of the Cold War, the long-term strategic competition was certainly a defeat. The CCP's ability to spread its influence resulted in a dangerous hermit kingdom in North Korea, America's second longest conflict in Vietnam, and a modern-day China which poses the most significant threat to US national security interests. A few actions at key points in the US-China conflict, whether that be fully supporting the KMT in Manchuria or launching a second amphibious assault north of the 38th parallel, could have possibly had significant positive results in America's favor.