

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
**OMB No. 0704-0188**

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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 12-05-2023		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> N/A	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  History Rhymes: Utilizing Lessons from Mahan and Corbett in World War I for Application to a Potential Sino-U.S. Conflict				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  LCDR Chris Martin				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC, Department of the Navy, the Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. Coast Guard.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  A famous aphorism often erroneously attributed to Mark Twain states, "History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Currently, it is hard to ignore the similarities between the pre-World War I era and the present situation between the United States and China. This paper examines the theoretical frameworks of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett to provide a comparative analysis of World War I and a potential Sino-United States maritime conflict. An in-depth examination of both Mahan and Corbett's theories as well as their applicability to both the conduct and outcomes of World War I are used to assess the current strategic situation between the United States and China. The paper proceeds to highlight the enduring relevance of Mahan and Corbett's theories in understanding contemporary maritime great power competition and concludes by offering several strategic recommendations for how the United States can counter China's rise and respond in the event of armed conflict in the maritime domain.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)</b> World War I, Mahan, Corbett, China, United States, South China Sea					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  N/A	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Director, Writing Center
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b>  401-841-6499

**History Rhymes: Utilizing Lessons from Mahan and Corbett in World War I for  
Application to a Potential Sino-U.S. Conflict**

**Introduction**

A famous aphorism often erroneously attributed to Mark Twain states, “History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” As the quote suggests, while history may not repeat itself, it can offer critical insight into the future and provide important context to explain the present. When assessing the modern geopolitical environment and searching for a similar historical era, it is hard not to hear the rhyme between the pre-World War I era and now.

One striking similarity is that great power competition is again at the forefront of the world stage. Before World War I, an ascendant Germany challenged the status quo power in Great Britain while today’s ascendant power, China, currently rivals the United States for global power and influence. Like Germany in the early twentieth century, China is an economic behemoth backed by an autocratic government that is consolidating and increasing its power. The United States, like Great Britain before World War I, is the standing world power with a democratic government and free-market economy in relative decline from its recent perch as the lone global hegemon.<sup>1</sup> Just as in the years preceding World War I, there is no ambiguity about the threat each side poses to each other and both sides are preparing with the other in mind. In the 2022 National Defense Strategy, the United States Department of Defense identified China as its, “most consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades,” a comparable view Great Britain held towards Germany from 1900-1914.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Markus Brunnermeier, Rush Doshi, and Harold James, “Beijing’s Bismarckian Ghosts: How Great Powers Compete Economically,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 161–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520571>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 161

This increasing escalation is also occurring against a similar backdrop featuring increasing globalization and technological advancements, reminiscent of the pre-World War I period. The development of tanks, the *Dreadnought*, and submarines in the early twentieth century mirrors developments such as artificial intelligence, drones, and the weaponization of cyberspace that are changing the calculus and complexion of potential conflict today. Other geopolitical events also resemble the pre-World War I period, notably regional conflict involving Russia— then in the Russo-Japanese War and today in the war against Ukraine.

Military escalation and buildup between the two preeminent powers of the time is also a shared feature between these eras. This is especially true of naval buildup and its use as a major tool of grand strategy and power projection. In the early twentieth century, this was marked by a shift in strategic thinking that focused on sea power, with prominent theorists such as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett becoming required reading for aspirational maritime powers. This development in strategic thought produced a period of “new navalism” seen in the massive buildup of naval forces by major powers across the globe, but primarily between Germany and Great Britain.<sup>3</sup>

Today, a renewed period of “new navalism” is also now in full swing. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the importance of establishing China as a naval power, echoing Mahan and Corbett’s ideas on sea power and the global influence a powerful Navy can provide.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, China has increased its maritime power projection with excessive territorial claims and militarization of the South China Sea. They have built a robust shipbuilding

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<sup>3</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Ashfield Press, 1986), p. 208

<sup>4</sup> John H. Maurer, “Classic Works on Sea Power Have Enduring Value,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 147, no. 6/1,420 (June 2021), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/june/classic-works-sea-power-have-enduring-value>.

program that surpassed the number of vessels in the U.S. Navy fleet in 2020.<sup>5</sup> In response, the United States has shifted its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, seeking to counter Chinese influence in the region. As evidenced by several recent U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* articles, military strategists have also shown a renewed focus on Mahan and Corbett's works to assess their relevance in this new period of naval competition.<sup>6</sup>

Given the historical similarities between then and now, naval theory — specifically the writings and ideas of Mahan and Corbett — appears ripe for study and re-examination. If history does truly rhyme, then there is much to be learned from the early twentieth century that can be applied to the United States' strategic situation today.

### **Back to the Basics: Corbett and Mahan's Views on Naval Strategy**

Overall, Corbett and Mahan's ideas are largely similar. As Kevin McCranie notes in *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, "their theories are not polar opposites; rather, they differ by a degree."<sup>7</sup> They differed slightly because they were writing for different audiences. As an American Naval Officer, Mahan was concerned by the limited size of America's navy at the turn of the twentieth century and understood its unrealized potential as a maritime power. To convince American leadership to strengthen its naval presence, he wrote

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<sup>5</sup> Brad Lendon, "China Has Built the World's Largest Navy. Now What's Beijing Going to Do with It?," *CNN*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/05/china/china-world-biggest-navy-intl-hnk-ml-dst/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Suarez, "Going to War with China? Ignore Corbett. Dust off Mahan!," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 146, no. 2 (December 2020), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/december/going-war-china-ignore-corbett-dust-mahan>; Daniel E. Ward, "Going to War With China? Dust Off Corbett," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 146, no. 1 (January 2020), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/january/going-war-china-dust-corbett>.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, Studies in Naval History and Sea Power (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), p. 225

extensively about the value of developing a strong navy and the elements of sea power that could coalesce within a state to form a strong maritime power.<sup>8</sup>

A British historian, Corbett's writing was geared toward a different audience as Great Britain's naval pedigree already fostered an appreciation for naval might and superiority. Since he did not have to emphasize the importance of developing a powerful navy, Corbett instead focused his writing on how to direct an established naval power effectively in war.<sup>9</sup> Their perspectives on sea power had much to do with the countries they lived in and the issues they saw as most pressing within their nations' naval organization and strategic thinking.

Despite the differences in whom they wrote for and their motivations, Mahan and Corbett also shared certain beliefs. First, they both stressed the importance of attaining "command of the sea", allowing a nation to build and protect its economic resources while denying those same advantages to its enemies.<sup>10</sup> While they agreed on the benefits of commanding the sea, they differed on how it could be attained and what it could ultimately achieve. Mahan advocated for the formation of large battle fleets with capital ships capable of striking an enemy's fleet. Forward deployment of assets and strategic colonial outposts were also essential to his plan, providing a safe harbor for the fleet and key staging areas from which to operate. This served two key purposes. First, during peacetime, a strong fleet would serve as a deterrent to achieving political aims while making war too costly for an opponent.<sup>11</sup> Second, if deterrence was unsuccessful, a strong fleet would be capable of carrying out its primary purpose—the

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<sup>8</sup> A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought.*, p. 210

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 228

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 211

destruction of an enemy fleet to gain control in the maritime theater.<sup>12</sup> To achieve this type of naval victory, Mahan believed in the concentration of the fleet directed at the opponent's center of gravity—its capital fleet. Once this type of decisive victory was achieved, a nation could disrupt an enemy's commerce and open their sea lines of communication that could ultimately wear an enemy down through a protracted war of attrition.<sup>13</sup>

While Corbett agreed that command of the sea was important, he did not share Mahan's views that it could alone be decisive and was open to alternatives to obtaining it through battle.<sup>14</sup> Corbett instead adopted Clausewitz's conception of limited warfare and applied it to the maritime theater, concluding that it was an ideal fit for conflict in this domain. Since naval battles did not threaten contiguous boundaries in the same manner as land wars, naval war could remain limited as it did not threaten the combatants' core interests. Additionally, it could isolate the theater of warfare to prevent the introduction of reinforcements that could serve to escalate hostilities to the more absolute form of war that Mahan advocated.<sup>15</sup> Because of Corbett's emphasis on limited warfare in the maritime domain, he also placed less importance on decisive naval battles won through force concentrations. Since naval battles were fought in the maritime commons, they could not be decisive in themselves as they had a less immediate impact on the populace of an enemy combatant compared to terrestrial warfare. Instead, he thought that command of the sea could benefit a larger war effort in other ways by targeting commerce, forcing desired diplomatic action, and assisting in the execution of land operations.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pg. 458

<sup>13</sup> Scott Fitzsimmons, "Evaluating the Masters of Strategy: A Comparative Analysis of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, and Corbett," *Innovations: A Journal of Politics 1998-2040* 7 (2007): pg. 34

<sup>14</sup> McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, p. 226

<sup>15</sup> Fitzsimmons, "Evaluating the Masters of Strategy: A Comparative Analysis of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, and Corbett," pg. 33

<sup>16</sup> McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, p. 226

Differences between Mahan and Corbett were also prominent in assessing the relative strength of an offensive versus defensive posture. Following Mahan's logic regarding naval battle as the most effective means to gain control of the sea, he advocated for an offensive posture in naval operations. Corbett differed, stressing the strategic defensive and highlighting numerous instances throughout history where a defensive posture delivered successful results for naval combatants.<sup>17</sup> Corbett's theory also went further than Mahan's to account for conditions where control of the sea was contested, advocating for a "fleet in being" to counteract temporary inferiority at sea. While Mahan also wrote about the importance of similar tactics to disrupt a stronger enemy, he considered it as strictly a secondary option and placed less credibility on its ability to deliver successful outcomes than Corbett.<sup>18</sup>

### **Applying Theory to Practice: World War I**

World War I provided the first opportunity for Mahan and Corbett's theories to be compared while being tested against the practical realities of modern naval warfare. Looking at different aspects of the war, both theorists' ideas can be validated in some instances or regarded as ineffective in others. Generally, Mahan's theories successfully informed and explained the naval buildup which helped to spark World War I. However, when assessing the conduct of naval warfare throughout the conflict, Corbett's ideas appear more prescient and applicable.

In the lead-up to the First World War, Mahan's work was instructive and informed the naval buildup of a rapidly industrializing and ascendant Germany. At the time, the British possessed the strongest navy, and at the turn of the twentieth century enjoyed unmatched supremacy in the maritime domain. However, German leaders, most notably Kaiser Wilhelm,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pg. 127

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pg. 155-157

understood the importance of building a strong navy to compete with the British and assure Germany of her “rightful place in the sun.”<sup>19</sup> This reality, combined with Germany’s disadvantageous geographical position with Great Britain, caused the Germans to embark on a major shipbuilding initiative, ultimately deciding to construct more than 38 battleships.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after the turn of the century, the British recognized Germany’s shipbuilding efforts were aimed at challenging their maritime supremacy and underwent naval reforms to increase their firepower and consolidate their naval presence near the home front.<sup>21</sup> This naval arms race defined the period of “new navalism” that preceded World War I and placed Germany and Great Britain in competition with one another, stoking tensions between the two nations until they were ultimately propelled into conflict.

While Mahan’s ideas were validated in the pre-war naval buildup, his thoughts often failed to explain the conduct of naval warfare in World War I. One of the clearest examples of this was the absence of decisive naval battles between Germany and Great Britain that Mahan thought would be critical to gaining command of the sea and ultimately winning the war. Except for one major battle at Jutland, these major sea battles did not occur. Great Britain possessed an advantageous geographic position which made the Germans susceptible to blockade and any attempt to engage the stronger British fleet in the North Sea especially risky. Writing twelve years before the war, Mahan noted that this initial disadvantage could, “be overcome only by adequate superiority of numbers...”<sup>22</sup> However, despite its naval build-up before World War I,

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<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery.*, pg. 214

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pg. 215

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pg. 217

<sup>22</sup> A.T. Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations Naval and Political* (London, 1902), pp. 165-7

Germany was still unable to match the strength of the British Navy as the Germans possessed only eighteen capital ships compared to Britain's twenty-nine in 1914.<sup>23</sup>

These geographic and numerical realities helped inform the conduct of the war, leading both the British and Germans to actively avoid large-scale engagements at sea. This placed the two combatants in a quasi-stalemate characterized by inaction between the fleets, with the Germans cautiously avoiding unfavorable battles close to the British coast. In response, the British avoided battles that would be similarly disadvantageous. They recognized that their distant blockades could remain effective even without engaging the High Seas Fleet and refused to be coaxed into battle near the German coast.<sup>24</sup> Both the British and Germans understood their relative positions in the maritime domain as well as the high risk and minimal benefits present in large fleet engagements. Ultimately, this prevented the type of decisive battles that Mahan believed were inevitable from ever occurring and allowed Great Britain to maintain its advantage at sea throughout the war.

While the conduct of the war did not fully adhere to Mahan's theory, it did more closely align with the theories proposed by Corbett. He explained, "We engage in exercising command whenever we conduct operations which are directed not against the enemy's battle-fleet, but to using sea communications for our own purposes, or to interfering with the enemy's use of them."<sup>25</sup> British strategy closely followed this thinking as the main thrust of its naval efforts focused on enforcing a distant economic blockade. The blockade sought to starve Germany and the Central Powers in a war of attrition by cutting off maritime commerce and imports.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. 205

<sup>24</sup> Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (New York: Naval Institute Press, 2012), p. 287

<sup>25</sup> Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1972), p. 233

<sup>26</sup> Strachan, *The First World War*, pp. 214-5

Exercising command of the sea also relied on defense against invasion. Britain placed great importance on this before and during the war, consolidating its fleet from overseas posts to bases along the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean to protect against the German threat.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, British military leadership displayed a shift in strategy, utilizing the fleet to facilitate expeditionary operations, most notably in the Dardanelles.<sup>28</sup> While action at the Dardanelles proved a disastrous failure for many reasons, it still represented a shift towards Corbett's theory of using command at sea as a means to achieving objectives through expeditionary missions, rather than an end that could lead directly to war termination itself.

Germany's naval actions could also largely be explained by Corbett's ideas. While Germany quickly realized it could not risk its fleet in large-scale battles, it did feel pressure to act in a way that would justify the large investments made by the Reichstag.<sup>29</sup> Acknowledging its naval inferiority, it relied upon *Kleinkrieg*, which promoted small-scale guerilla operations designed to whittle away Britain's numerical superiority while also harassing allied and neutral shipping akin to Corbett's "fleet in being".<sup>30</sup> This was primarily carried out through U-Boat warfare close to the German coast, which resulted in the sinking of numerous shipping and transport vessels. U-Boat warfare also targeted British warships in an attempt to steadily reduce their numerical advantage but achieved much less success, especially against Britain's most capable warships.<sup>31</sup> As the war progressed, Germany's main emphasis shifted to destroying shipping destined for Great Britain, focusing on the amount of tonnage sunk in an attempt to starve the island nation into submission.<sup>32</sup> These actions followed Corbett's ideas closely as he

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<sup>27</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery.*, p. 217

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 256-257

<sup>29</sup> Strachan, *The First World War.*, p. 203

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 203

<sup>31</sup> Halpern, *A Naval History Of World War I.*, p. 288

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 305

suggested, "A plan of war which has the destruction of trade for its primary object implies in the party using it an inferiority at sea."<sup>33</sup> While the High Seas Fleet could not compete with the Grand Fleet in its current state, it could use these asymmetric tactics in an attempt to level the playing field. As a result, they focused much of their naval strategy on achieving these limited ends with varying degrees of success throughout the war.

Like the conduct of the war, the outcomes it produced more closely aligned with Corbett's writings as naval action failed to produce the decisive results Mahan predicted. Instead, the outcomes of naval activity produced varied results, serving as contributing factors in some cases and negligent factors in others. The most illustrative example of this was the Battle of Jutland. The battle was the largest in modern naval history at the time, involving 100,000 men aboard 250 ships in less than 72 hours.<sup>34</sup> At Jutland, the Germans inflicted more materiel losses upon the British than they sustained, quickly claiming a major victory over the British in the North Sea.<sup>35</sup> However, considering the relative impacts on both Navies, the Germans left the battle in far worse shape. Despite inflicting larger casualties on the British fleet, the losses sustained by the Germans comprised a greater portion of their fleet, leaving them in a weaker position.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after the battle concluded, German Admiral Reinhard Scheer realized this and wrote to the German Kaiser that despite the High Seas Fleet's best efforts they could not reasonably achieve command of the sea over the British with any type of fleet action.<sup>37</sup> In reality, the type of fleet action Mahan predicted would be decisive in winning command of the sea proved strategically irrelevant at Jutland and throughout the entire war.

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<sup>33</sup> Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 261

<sup>34</sup> Strachan, *The First World War*, p. 214

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 246

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246

Economic blockade proved more effective than the lone major fleet engagement at Jutland but in isolation produced ambiguous rather than decisive results. The Allied blockade was largely effective as it reduced German imports by 60% during the war, helping to create food shortages throughout Germany that produced great hardships among its population.<sup>38</sup> However, there were numerous issues within Germany including poor government administration and a lack of domestic agricultural production that greatly exacerbated Germany's food crisis. As Hew Strachan explains in *The First World War*, "The blockade worked not in isolation but through its interaction with the fault lines in German society and in the structure of German policy."<sup>39</sup> The blockade alone was unlikely to prove decisive but did contribute to the difficulties Germany experienced. This supported Corbett's ideas regarding economic warfare and command of the sea as being significant, but insufficient alone to lead directly to war termination.

### **Modern Application: The Strategic Situation with China**

Today, many of the pre-war conditions that existed between Germany and Great Britain appear comparable to the circumstances currently facing the United States and China, although there are several critical differences. Like Germany, China has studied Mahan's teachings and used them to instruct an impressive naval buildup over the past decade. As far back as 2012, Chinese leadership has asserted the need to become a maritime power to protect its core interests and project power both regionally and on the global stage.<sup>40</sup> Since then, China has steadily continued to grow its naval strength. In 2018, China held an impressive fleet review in front of

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<sup>38</sup> Strachan, *The First World War*, p. 218

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 221

<sup>40</sup> "How Is China Modernizing Its Navy?," Center for Strategic & International Studies, December 17, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-modernizing-its-navy-0>.

President Xi Jinping showing off modern ships and aircraft eliciting comparisons to the “spectacles of naval nationalism exhibited by Imperial Germany that alerted Mahan to Kaiser Wilhelm’s world power aspirations.”<sup>41</sup> Xi further cemented the comparison, seemingly reading from a Mahanian script in his comments during the review and in a subsequent speech to China’s Central Military Commission in which he advocated for a strong navy to protect China’s sea rights and solidify China as a top-ranking military power.<sup>42</sup>

While China’s build-up has drawn comparisons to the pre-World War I period, the United States’ response until recent years has been markedly different. Unlike Great Britain, the United States has been slow to respond to China’s massive naval buildup, not identifying China as a primary pacing threat until the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. The delay in identifying this threat has created a major strategic disadvantage for the United States. By 2025, China’s fleet is expected to grow to 400 ships while the United States currently possesses less than 300, with plans to deploy 350 ships by 2045.<sup>43</sup> China’s Navy is also buttressed by its Coast Guard and maritime militia comprised of fishing vessels that operate in the grey zone to extend Chinese claims of sovereignty and power projection in contested sea areas. However, amid escalating tensions over Taiwan and alarming predictions from senior U.S. military officials of a potential conflict with China within the current decade, it is fair to wonder if U.S. preparations to counter China will be too little and too late if a potential conflict erupts.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Maurer, “Classic Works on Sea Power Have Enduring Value.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Brad Lendon, “Expert’s Warning to U.S. Navy on China: Bigger Fleet Almost Always Wins,” *CNN*, January 17, 2023, <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2023/01/16/asia/china-navy-fleet-size-history-victory-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Brittany Bernstein, “U.S. General Warns Country Could Be at War with China by 2025,” *National Review*, January 28, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/u-s-general-warns-country-could-be-at-war-with-china-by-2025/>.

While fleet size has come into focus in recent years due to China's massive build-up, it is not the only consideration for measuring naval power. Other factors must be taken into account, and observers largely believe that despite an increasing delta in capital ships, the United States still possesses an advantage in overall naval capabilities. According to the Congressional Research Service, Chinese naval weaknesses include joint operations, anti-submarine warfare, long-range targeting, personnel training and experience, at sea resupply, and limited overseas basing.<sup>45</sup> These factors make determining which side possesses the naval advantage more challenging. As such, lessons from World War I appear more difficult to apply here. The capability gap between the German and British Navies was less pronounced, making a direct comparison between the two eras more challenging. While fleet size ultimately emerged as one of the major pitfalls for the German naval effort, it is unclear how large a role it will play in a scenario with a more pronounced gap in naval capabilities as currently exists between the United States and China.

Other differences between the present and World War I are accompanied by their own strategic implications. One of these differences lies in which side possesses key geographic weaknesses. In World War I, Germany possessed a clear geographic disadvantage which informed the conduct of the war preventing major sea conflicts and allowing the British to retain command of the sea through distant blockade without risking its fleet. While China's natural geographic position could be seen as a weakness, its actions over the past two decades have substantially strengthened their position. They have claimed large swaths of the South China Sea through its nine dashed line declaration, made notable increases in its maritime force

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<sup>45</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities- Background and Issues for Congress" (Congressional Research Service, December 1, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/253>.

projection, and militarized distant islands and reefs throughout the South China Sea arguably turning its natural geography into a major strength.

These efforts have increased Chinese presence and power projection in the region and placed a virtual chokehold throughout the South China Sea. In combination with its fleet buildup, China has established the South China Sea as an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) zone to significantly degrade and limit potential combatants' capabilities and ability to operate in the region. Combined with the development of ballistic missiles capable of targeting forces at increased distances, the ability of the United States to operate within or around the first island chain closest to China will be significantly hampered.<sup>46</sup> These realities will likely make it too risky, both in terms of capital assets and personnel, for the United States to operate within or near the first island chain in any potential conflict.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

In preparation for a potential conflict, the United States should lean on the teachings of Mahan to combat China's rise and increase its deterrent ability. Unlike World War I, the United States as the status quo power has not maintained the advantage in sheer fleet size. While the United States can remain comforted to a degree in retaining the upper hand in overall naval capabilities, fleet size still matters. Sam Tangredi's recent article "Bigger Fleets Win" solidifies this point as his in-depth study of 28 wars showed that 25 were won by the side with the larger fleet, while only three smaller fleets with superior technology achieved victory.<sup>47</sup> Understanding these lessons, the United States should move expeditiously to decrease the delta in fleet size

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<sup>46</sup> Joe Sestak, "The U.S. Navy's Loss of Command of the Seas to China and How to Regain It (Winter 2021)," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.26153/TSW/11704>.

<sup>47</sup> Sam J. Tangredi, "Bigger Fleets Win," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 149, no. 1/1,439 (January 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/january/bigger-fleets-win>.

between China and itself. To close this strategic gap, urgent political action is needed. Action from Congress is necessary to increase domestic shipbuilding capacity to expedite the development of new capital assets. To realize the full impact of increased production, the Navy must also learn from its recent shipbuilding failures such as the Littoral Combat Ship to field new assets that are delivered in a timely fashion and meet mission needs.

The United States should also look to Mahan's ideas on overseas basing and force projection. Due to the regional nature of naval warfare in the North Sea and Atlantic during World War I, this was less of a concern. However, given the expansive distances involved in a potential Pacific conflict this is one area of Mahan's theory that should be revisited. While his reasons for overseas basing framed in terms of colonialism and coaling stations are certainly outdated, the need to project power from overseas bases remains. The United States has already taken concrete steps in this direction by increasing force concentrations at existing Pacific bases such as Guam and recently establishing a comprehensive military basing agreement with the Philippines. The United States should continue these types of initiatives to seek like-minded partners in the region offering presence and protection in exchange for forward basing locations. Strengthening regional ties in this manner will continue to raise the stakes for Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and provide a suitable deterrent toward Beijing backed by credible U.S. forces and commitments.

The U.S. Coast Guard can also play a role as a deterrent force in the years ahead to stave off potential conflict with China. Currently, China uses its own Coast Guard and maritime militia to harass commercial activity in other nation's exclusive economic zones (EEZ). While the role of the Coast Guard is absent from Mahan's thinking, these current realities make the Coast Guard a compelling option to project U.S. presence and deter Chinese aggression. Here, the

Coast Guard can use its unique law enforcement authorities in concert with bilateral agreements with regional partners to contest China's efforts to assert its excessive claims of maritime sovereignty. These actions can be carried out organically via Coast Guard cutters or through deployed law enforcement detachments on Navy assets to protect the commercial interests of partner nations. This will effectively reduce China's ability to operate in the "grey zone", a major sticking point for U.S. allies in the Western Pacific. This type of action will also go further to disincentivize and reduce China's ability to project force in these contested sea areas.

While Mahan is instructive while the conflict remains cold, the United States should shift focus more intently on Corbett's teachings if the conflict turns hot. While the status quo power retained the geographic upper hand during World War I, the script appears flipped in a potential conflict in the Western Pacific. Due to the advantages China possesses in fleet size and the effectiveness of its A2/AD campaign, it appears unlikely that the United States will be able to wrest command of the South China Sea in the immediate future. Like World War I, this seems likely to create conditions that make it disadvantageous for the United States to pursue large sea battles in the region. The Chinese will also be presented with little strategic advantage in seeking out these types of engagements far from their shores, presenting the potential for a similar naval stalemate as existed during World War I.

This reality should lead the United States to focus its efforts primarily on a distant blockade that likely limits options surrounding the first island chain. Targeting commercial shipping will be essential to influence domestic conditions in China that will ultimately force Chinese forces beyond the first island chain where the United States can fight on a more level playing field. There, the United States can use its capability advantage while forcing the Chinese to re-prioritize asset placement, in an attempt to bring the fight to a preferred location for the

United States while simultaneously decreasing and weakening Chinese naval presence in its current stronghold. For the United States to realize this strategy, it is crucial that work now focuses on projecting presence and maintaining naval superiority outside the first island chain, creating sufficient deterrence to slow the expansion of Chinese aims beyond its own backyard.

Due to the size advantage of the Chinese naval fleet, the United States will also need to consider how it can operate as an effective “fleet in being”. Operating at a substantial disadvantage in sheer numbers of capital assets, the United States must focus the opening salvo of any conflict on leveling the playing field through asymmetric tactics that can whittle away at China’s command of the sea. While these tactics were ultimately ineffective for Germany in gaining control of the sea during World War I, the current operational and technological environment offers an expanded menu of options compared to a century ago. Improving capabilities in cyber warfare and the further development of unmanned assets can provide new opportunities for asymmetric action akin to Corbett’s concept of a “fleet in being” to achieve success, if properly leveraged.

### **Conclusion**

As tensions continue to rise in the Western Pacific, examining lessons from history is a useful tool to inform strategic decision making. Policy makers and strategists alike could benefit from using these lessons learned as a catalyst for strategic action. The historical rhyme between the pre-World War I era and now offers several important lessons that inform how a potential conflict with China in the maritime domain will unfold. While the conditions leading up to World War I and the present era are similar, the fact that China possesses some of the same major strategic advantages in terms of geography and fleet size that were held by the British

entering World War I should cause some concern. However, examining the theories of both Mahan and Corbett offers some insight on how the U.S. can proceed.

A basic framework for success hinges on emphasizing portions of Mahan's strategy to include an expeditious build-up of the U.S. fleet, increasing overseas basing, and projecting force both conventionally and in the grey zone. These actions will serve to deter Chinese aggression and force projection by raising the costs of a potential conflict to disincentivize China's continued rise. Doing so will entail a worthy but substantial increase in effort in the Western Pacific, one that the U.S. has already begun over the past few years. If the U.S. fails in deterring China's naval build-up and continued aggression, a shift in strategy to emphasize more of Corbett's ideas will be necessary. If the U.S. is unable to contain China through deterrence, it will need to focus on more asymmetric tactics such as a distant blockade and sustaining a "fleet in being" in attempt to level the playing field in the maritime domain in the early years of a potential conflict.

The next several years will be imperative for the United States to chart a strategic course to prepare for potential conflict with China in the maritime domain. As such, policy makers and strategists should lean on lessons learned from a similar era in the lead up to World War I. Utilizing these lessons learned alongside applicable portions of Mahan and Corbett's theories will be vital to inform its strategic decisions in the critical years ahead.

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