

IS CHINA A SEA POWER?

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Abstract

Richard Kouyoumdjian seeks to answer the question about if China is or not a Sea Power. After analysing what authors like Alfred Thayer Mahan have to say about this concept, he uses the more contemporary points of view of Geoffrey Till to define what kind of Sea Power a nation, particularly in this case China, has. Through the different chapters the author arrives to the conclusion that enables us to understand China's interests and how it will develop in the future and her relation with the US Naval Power.

Key words: China; sea power; power protection; Mahan; US Navy.

On July 12th, 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration based at The Hague, in what is known as the "South China Sea Arbitration", produced a decision that favored the claims made by the Republic of the Philippines. The decision was unfavorable to the People's Republic of China and it became one of the most important news of the week because it involved China and the South China Sea. The issues related to the South China Sea and the way that China conducts itself and exercises its power in that sea area have been present for quite some time and it is expected that this arbitration decision will increase the already existing tensions.

What is seapower?

The case of the South China Sea is a current situation that can be used with the purpose of answering the question of this essay – Is China a seapower? But before doing so, let us first check what is seapower. Seapower as a concept was made popular by United States Navy Captain

Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890 when he wrote the book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660 – 1783*, and sometimes it is also referred to as maritime power, naval power, formidable naval strength or naval strength as a weapon of war. What Alfred Thayer Mahan intended to do by publishing his book, was to influence the United States of America political and defense establishments with the need of a bigger navy and the investments in maritime infrastructure needed to sustain that effort. Mahan's basic idea was that countries with large and powerful naval and maritime organizations, had a direct influence in the position that countries occupied in the world if following such formula and their capacity to project power and achieve dominating positions and acquiring the wealth that comes with it. He used the example of the United Kingdom, a country that had followed that road and had ended being the world premier power during the 19th century.

Obviously what Mahan wrote back in 1890 was written in the context of the reality of the

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US at the end of the 19th century and using the example of the benefits that such formula brought to the British Empire in terms of prosperity and prestige, but there was a clear and direct correlation with the result that a strong navy and maritime infrastructure produced at the time for those countries, and that has the US still obtaining benefits of the investments made approximately 120 years ago. If following Mahan recipe is still applicable or needed in the 21st century, that is another question, and that in the case of China will be reviewed in due course.

If Mahan ideas were based in having or developing the conditions that enabled a seapower condition or capacity to exist with the purpose of achieving a position that was beneficial to the country, more current authors such as Geoffrey Till use an input – output type of analysis to explain what creates a seapower and on the other hand, indicate what is to be expected in terms of output, or better said, the

ends and not the means, or the consequences.¹ The advantage of focusing on the purpose of seapower and not on the inputs is that the discussion of what building blocks or investments are needed with the purpose of generating such a capacity is avoided. It does not mean that defining the specific components that a particular country needs is not important, but these can be different when moving from one case to another. Having said that, if both Till and Mahan were to meet nowadays, for sure they would conclude that the purpose of seapower is power projection. Why using the purpose of seapower is practical, easy and current to modern times? It is because technology has changed. The purpose of seapower is power projection on the sea and from the sea over land. Current military technologies allow countries to project power on the sea from land in the form of missiles, aircrafts and other artifacts. As mentioned in the prior page, dictionaries very much define seapower in terms of the

1. Till (2013), p.25

output, but an output that is highly related to naval strength and capabilities. If that was the case, seapower would be something that could only be applied or implemented by naval forces operating at sea. For sure the way dictionaries define seapower will change eventually, but the way they define seapower is very traditional and based on the examples of the past and the popular knowledge on the subject.

Power projection on the sea and from the sea over land must have a purpose. No one projects power without a purpose. No one projects military power without a good purpose. No one spends significant percentages of its budget on sea and land power projection without a purpose. The US and the People's Republic of China lead the pack when it comes to military spending. Power projection also requires defining the eventual object or objects over which the power will be projected and their location. Power projection should be part of a defense strategy which has to be proportional to the power needed to be projected. There is no reason to have aircraft carriers if you do not need them. Same thing applies to nuclear missiles carrying submarines. Power projection needs assets that are effective enough to deliver the power needed in the place and time it is required. If a country is only worried about keeping nearby sea lanes open, why should it worry about having assets that are not needed for that purpose.

Till, also mentions that seapower is a relative concept and not an absolute one. It is not that you are or not are a seapower.² This is not something where number 1 is the only one to get the title of seapower. All countries have some degree of seapower, or at least they should have it if being able to project power on the sea or from the sea on land. Interpreting what he says is that the US is not the only seapower in the world. It may be number 1, but not the only one. This idea is something that also should be kept in-mind when looking at the question this essay has to answer. The same applies to an example that Till brings-up when reviewing the concept of relativity of seapower. He brings-up the example of the Soviet Union.³ His point here is that following the

focus on the ends or purpose of seapower, clearly the Soviet Union qualified as a seapower, but he also brings-up several ideas that are helpful when looking at China as such. He very well indicates that the purpose of the Soviet Navy was power projection in narrow and local seas. Its focus was not blue water operations. The Soviet Navy was not in the business of convoy protection or power projection on the other side of the world as understood by the US or Royal Navy. The Soviet Navy was functional to the Soviet strategic purposes and was in the business of power projection. There is not written the way power projection has to be done, except that seapower projection has to take place on the sea or from the sea over land. One final takeaway from Till and one that is also important when looking at the Chinese case. He indicates that countries have both land and sea power, and that if one is larger than the other one, there should be an influence in the way the less important power is exercised.⁴ If this analysis was made to the UK in the 19th century, the seapower component dominated and dictated the way the British Empire conducted its business at the time. Nowadays it is not clear if this is the dominating idea. Russia on the other hand continues to have a dominating landpower component when compared to its seapower. The US is a case that could be classified as an equilibrium.

Before moving to China, one final comment on seapower. Seapower is a concept that is normally defined, managed and developed by the naval establishments of the countries. Normally the professional head of the respective naval organization leads the conversations on the subject and members of the naval services are the ones developing ideas and teaching on the subject. Mahan and Corbett are taught in all naval war colleges, and naval war colleges are the places where seapower conceptual evolution is done. This is not surprising if seapower is looked from the perspective of power projection. Power projection is normally to be done and understood in terms of projection of military power. But the problem with seapower is that seapower is the projection of military power on the sea and from the sea over land, and for that purpose not only

2. Ibid, p.25
3. Till (2013), p.25
4. Ibid, p.25

naval forces are useful, but also other weapon systems that are not normally managed and administrated by the naval services, including cyber weapons and anti-ship ballistic missiles. This issue is like the mistake dictionaries make when defining seapower only in terms of naval power or naval strength. Leaving seapower in the hands of the naval service could eventually lead to a shortsighted vision of the problem. Seapower, if well understood, is a concept to be managed at the national strategic level and it should be part of the national strategic definitions. When looking at what China is doing and how it is managing its seapower development this is something that should be reviewed.

Is China a seapower?

Having covered in depth what seapower is and understanding that all countries have some degree of seapower, it is the turn to answer the question: Is China is a seapower? If wanting to avoid the trap of the means and instead focusing on the ends, the logical way to answer this question would be to check if China is currently or has in the recent past projected power over the sea or from the sea on land? The answer here seems pretty straight forward. All evidence shows that China has been and is currently projecting power on the sea regions and coastal countries that are located in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. If that power projection has been successful or not is another question, but for sure it has been projecting power in those sea regions. Does it need to project power on other sea areas of the world, it seems that it is not the case and the evidence does not indicate that it has been doing so. Does it need to project power from the sea on other land regions that are not part or surrounding the South and East China Seas? Again, it seems it is not the case, and again there is no evidence showing this is happening or has happened.

Purpose of China´s seapower projection

Does China have a purpose behind that power projection in the South and East China Seas? Apart from its historic claim and purpose to

take control of Taiwan, the evidence seems to indicate that it is interested in the mining, energy and finishing resources to be found in the South and East China Seas. China's stock of natural resources is not enough when considering the size of its population and its growing economy, and it needs to look elsewhere for such resources. On the other hand, China is growing and it is an economy that is open to the world and therefore is the most interested party in keeping the sea lanes that are located in the sea regions that lead to their ports and via which a significant part of their exports and imports are transported. If the sea lanes that connect China to world are closed China has a huge problem. China has become the number one country in exports containers transportation via sea transportation and the second one when it comes to imports. China imports 75% of its oil via sea. China also has strong motives when it comes to protecting its 14,500 kilometers of coastal borders. China history is full of examples of when it has been invaded from the sea and that is something that drives them to look to secure the control and command of the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea. By doing so the probability of having a repeat history is minimized.⁵

China seapower projection tools

Does China have the tools required to project power on the sea and from the sea on the land? China´s defence budget is number 2 in the world after the US. China is currently spending US\$156 billion and in prior years it has been in the range of US\$190 billion. The US spending on the defense matters is in the range of US\$550 billion, but the big difference is that the US has global commitments and that is not the case of China, or at least that is not the current situation. China's current focus is protecting its land and sea borders and the sea regions that surround their coastal borders. China's PLA Navy fleet is number 2 in the world after the US Navy, but again, China does not have global commitments, and except for the anti-piracy patrols off East Africa, it is not in the business of protecting and keeping secure

5. Institute for Security & Development Policy, China´s "Sea Power Nation" Strategy, p.14

the global commons. That is something that is being taken care of by the US Navy.⁶ China's fleet is relatively large in numbers and suited to the job at hand, but currently lacks the capabilities to project power on the sea when it comes to the US Navy or in the event that the US Navy was determined to not let China project power over objects that the US was determined to protect. Are the US and China willing to engage each other? The evidence shows that so far that has not been the case, but that does not mean it could not happen. Having said that, if China continues to grow and develop most possibly something will happen. The current shipbuilding plans of the PLA Navy show that they are planning for possible scenarios that go beyond anti-access or access denial capabilities when it comes to the US Navy. China is also actively developing cyber weapons and anti-ship ballistic missiles that could be very damaging to US Naval assets operating in the sea areas that China is seeking to control and for which it would be necessary to project its power. It is also important in this section is that China is the number 1 country in the world in terms of annual gross tonnage of shipbuilding. In 2015 they produced 25 million tons of ships. That is 59 times the production of the US and have overtaken countries that historically were the leaders in this field, Japan and Korea. Why is this important in the case of China, because for the stage of development of seapower in which China is currently located, having these capabilities is something that helps.

Land vs. sea power

The development of China as a seapower has not been immune to the discussion of land power versus sea power or how to balance its land and sea powers capabilities. China has 22,117 kilometers of land borders. That is approximately 8,500 kilometers longer than its coastal borders and shares borders with 16 countries including some such as Russia, India, Pakistan, Mongolia,

Kazakhstan, Vietnam and North Korea. China is not located in an easy neighborhood and has had problems in the past with several of those countries. China historically has been more a land power than a sea power country, but that has recently been changing. Its land borders are secured for the moment, and therefore it can focus on other needs, but also there has been a political endorsement to the development that seapower projection needs generate, and as long as China does not establish a need to acquire sea global power projection capacity, the discussion in China will continue to be focused on acquiring the capabilities needed to maintaining power projection capabilities on the South and East China Seas. The development of China into a major and significant seapower has generated lots of literature on the subject. The matter attracts attention both in China and abroad, but that not only has relation to the subject in itself, but with the fact that the US has naval presence in the region and it has signaled its intention to give the Asia-Pacific region an increased importance.

Conclusion

It seems that the answer to question is yes. China is a seapower. That is not only based on the fact that all countries have some degree of seapower, but basically the yes is founded on the fact that China is currently projecting power on the sea and from the sea on land. That power projection mainly happens in the South and East China Sea regions. This yes is also sustained by the economic and strategic reasons that give purpose to such exercise of power projection, and last but not least, China has developed the capabilities currently required to project power on the sea and from the sea on land. Its seapower capabilities are limited and consistent with the current strategic needs, but in no case are in conditions to challenge the US dominance of the global commons.

6. <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21674648-china-no-longer-accepts-america-should-be-asia-pacifics-dominant-naval-power-who-rules>

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