

Quality and luck over quantity: Alfred Thayer Mahan's influence on the Imperial Japanese Navy in the early to mid-20th century

By Zhouyuan Li

AUTHOR BIO

Zhouyuan Li is a senior high school student in Country Garden School in Foshan, China. He is passionate about late 19th to early 20th century naval history, politics and naval science, Chinese history and International Relations. He hopes to conduct more inter-disciplinary studies in these areas.

ABSTRACT

The Imperial Japanese Navy's doctrine of Kantai Kessen has strong roots in the theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, including the concept of sea power. This article discussed the theory of Alfred Thayer Mahan on sea power, how a series of geographical, economic and political factors shape the formation of sea power, how the Imperial Japanese Navy, through their experiences in the Russo Japanese War, began utilizing the theory of sea power to shape the Kantai Kessen doctrine, and a series of endeavors that reflect such utilization.

Through analysis of engagements during the Russo Japanese War, how Japan could be situated in Mahan's theory, and the potential scenarios in a war against the United States, this article concludes that the experiences of the Russo Japanese War were not applicable to an engagement with the United States Navy, while the Japanese geographical situation makes it ill-suited for becoming a candidate of sea power in Mahan's theory.

Keywords: Naval History, the Imperial Japanese Navy, Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Russo Japanese War, the Kantai Kessen Doctrine, WWII

INTRODUCTION

What does the Japanese Naval Command and an American naval theorist of the late 19th century have in common? The answer is a naval doctrine that reflected and influenced naval powers of the past and the present and especially so in the Imperial Japanese Navy. With the theory, the idea of the “control of the sea” proposed by the naval theorist, Alfred Mayer Mahan, Japan would embark on a journey of imperial expansion, and feverish dreams of decisive victories, which would eventually culminate in its clash with the United States decades later.

But how did the idea of the “control of the sea” affect Japanese naval theory and construction, how did its usage show through experience, and why did this idea, or the extent to which it was applied to the Imperial Japanese Navy, not help them win their war against their arch enemy, the United States, in the Second World War? Part of the answer lies in the theories of Mahan and the experiences of the Russo Japanese war, which paved Japan’s inevitable path to an eventual doom that was imagined to be a victory.

CONTROL OF THE SEA

Captain Alfred Mayer Mahan, the president of the US Naval War college, published his famous work “The Influence of Sea Power Upon History” in 1890. Through discussions of various historical cases ranging from the years 1660 to 1783, mostly in Europe, Mahan identifies the three “pillars” of sea power: overseas commerce, naval and merchant fleets (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2006). Through these three pillars, a naval power can supply its own economy, its armed forces, its overseas invasions and plans while stopping the enemy power from achieving the same purpose. In order to realize these pillars of sea power, there is a list of conditions that must be taken into consideration.

Geographical Position

The factor of geographical positioning (Kaminer, 1964) is crucial in the case of Great

Britain. The geographical situation of the British Isles granted the British Empire a virtual immunity from land invasions and rivalry as it separates her from the intense power struggles of continental Europe. Furthermore, its location in the Atlantic provides it with close access to vital trade routes to continental Europe, Africa and even the Americas. Mahan’s theory also applies to the United States.

Physical Conformation

In this instance, physical confirmation (Kaminer, 1964) means both the domestic geographical situation and the natural resources of a nation. This implies that a nation with a coastline or geographical feature more prone to attacks and blockades will be less likely to exert sea power successfully, an instance prominent in the case of the Austro-Hungarian Navy during World War One, as the bulk of its fleet is trapped in the Adriatic Sea by the combined Entente navies. The other aspect of physical conformation lies in natural resources, as it determines the nation’s ability to exert lasting sea power in the case of a war of attrition.

Extent of Territories and Population

Having a large or small territory can work both ways according to Mahan. While a flow of manpower is always necessary for manning a navy, the extent of territories can work both for and against a nation in the event of war. While too little territory makes a potential occupation or maritime offensive easier, having too large a territory with little population and assets to defend it can also be detrimental to the nation’s exertion of influence. The inability to concentrate manpower due to issues associated with having forces in separate oceans and seas can also fatally impact sea power.

Character of People and Government.

The attitude of the government and its citizens towards maritime expansion can also play a large role in influencing the formation of sea power. Great Britain in this factor may be considered as a role model. The strong maritime tradition of Great Britain since the 1700s,

widespread public support and pride in the navy and the government's determination to become the sole dominating sea power on the planet - the Two Power Standard, for instance - were contributing factors in creating the most successful navy in the world in the 19th century.

Combining these four factors, a nation can successfully exert its sea power, obtain the goals it desires to achieve through naval power by means of a naval blockade or amphibious invasion, and thus win a war.

KANTAI KESSEN

In 1905, the nature of East Asian power struggles drastically changed with the battle of Tsushima. The Russo-Japanese war marks the end of the Russian War effort and the elimination of the Russian navy as a fighting force in the Far East. This battle causes a number of factors of victory to emerge in the minds of Japanese naval theorists.

The war and the subsequent battle of Tsushima rely heavily on geographical separation and consequently, a divide-and-conquer style victory over most of the Russian navy. Through the battle of the Yellow Sea and later the capture of Port Arthur, the Japanese were able to defeat the Russian First Pacific Squadron before the Second Pacific Squadron could arrive and join forces, which would present a numerical advantage over the Japanese Navy, which at the time consisted of only six battleships while the Russian navy could wield up to fifteen battleships. The timely destruction of the Russian First Pacific Squadron freed up the Japanese Navy in preparation for the Second Pacific Squadron's entry into the Far East and both navies' subsequent engagement, breaking the possibility of a potentially overwhelming Russian superiority.

The forces present at the battle of Tsushima were, although outnumbered in terms of capital ships, considerably superior in both quality and crew. When the battleships of the Imperial Japanese Navy were constructed by Great Britain, they were designed to be more powerful in armament and armor than any other warships afloat (Evans & Peattie,

1997/2012). The battleships in the Imperial Japanese Navy at the battle of Tsushima were an improved version of British battleships, with the Fuji class battleship being an improved version of the Royal Sovereign class battleship and the Shikishima class battleship being an improvement over the Majestic class (Chesneau & Kolesnik, 1979). Moreover, these battleships are enhanced to operate in a coherent formation in terms of machinery in order to improve coordination.

Furthermore, events such as the sneak attack on Port Arthur at the opening of the war also plays a role in the eventual victory, as it temporarily confines the Russian fleet in the harbor, allowing the Japanese to form a blockade. This material and tactical superiority enables the Imperial Japanese Navy to exercise and maintain control of the sea.

By incorporating the experiences of the Battle of Tsushima and the study of Mahan's works, the idea of "Kantai Kessen" emerged, meaning a "decisive fleet battle". With its qualitatively superior force, the Japanese fleet will first, weaken the enemy force with attacks utilizing torpedo boats or exploit geographical advantage, and then, defeat the weakened or separated enemy battle fleet.

With Russia gone, the Anglo-Japanese alliance still in effect, and Russia effectively liquidated as a naval power in the Far East, the last remaining potential enemy on the horizon is the also rapidly emerging US Navy, whose influence in Southeast Asia and expansion of colonial interests mean that soon the two countries will come to blows. Furthermore, the natural resources in US Colonial holdings in Southeast Asia are attractive for a resource-deprived Japan. Facing these practical needs, Japanese naval theorists propose the acquisition of these areas of interest and if possible, even more territories, through a limited war. They still considered this plausible at the time as the US fleet is based in San Diego rather than Pearl Harbor and it would take time to deploy to the Far East. Thus, the Imperial Japanese Navy plans to draw the US Fleet deep into Far Eastern waters, slowly weaken it through cruiser and torpedo boat attacks, and

eventually create a decisive engagement on Japanese terms that would grant the Imperial Japanese Navy control of the seas. Admiral Gonnohyoe Yamamoto estimates that if Japan had a fleet seventy percent of the strength of the United States Navy in such scenarios, then Japan could still fight to win (Stille, 2014).

Based on this mindset, the Imperial Japanese Navy made a series of plans to force a war in their favor in the first half of the 20th century. This includes negotiations at the Washington Naval Treaty, in which figures such as Kato Kanji attempt to call for a 5:3.5 ratio of US to Japanese capital ship tonnage, (Ford, 2007) the establishment of a powerful air-to-surface bomber force, and the development of the Yamato class battleships.

SHORTCOMINGS

However, is Japan really in a position that would fit the Mahanian theory, especially the seven factors contributing to a successful sea power, against an opponent such as the United States? The answer is most likely no. While Japan is willing to take risks against the United States, it is quite difficult for a few reasons to win a confrontation.

While the experience of the Russo-Japanese War is indeed applicable to a certain extent, in that Japan has successfully exercised sea power, it is difficult to replicate this success against the United States and the situation during the war is partially the result of events that are unlikely to reoccur.

The United States faces fewer difficulties regarding geographical aspects when attempting to concentrate and consolidate a force capable of dealing with the Imperial Japanese Navy. Unlike the Russians, who require a voyage around the globe from the Baltic to the Pacific, the fact that most of the American fleet can be stationed in the Pacific and support operations relatively easily make it difficult for a “divide and conquer” style of attrition which marks Russo Japanese war. While it is arguable that the US also requires forces in the Atlantic, the completion of the Panama Canal makes rapid transfers of naval

assets possible, considerably faster than the Russian Navy does when it reinforces Port Arthur.

The Japanese victory against the Russians and part of the reason they have obtained sea power is the occurrence of a series of relatively unlikely events. In the earlier phase of the Russo-Japanese War, two events happened that reduced the Russian Navy’s ability to conduct skilled operations. One is the death of Admiral Stephan Makarov, famed for offering diversity, aggression due to the sinking of the battleship Petropavlovsk. This event deprives Russia of one of its most capable and popular admirals. The second is the death of Admiral Wilhelm Vitgeft, who took over command of the Port Arthur fleet after Makarov’s death. He is killed by a lucky shot during the battle of the Yellow Sea by the battleship Asahi. This incident caused the Russian fleet to stay in Port Arthur for the rest of its existence before its destruction by Japanese land force, thus depriving the Russians of a chance to exert its sea power.

To an extent, Mahan’s theory itself contradicts the notion of a potential Japanese victory over the US. When considering the aspects that allow a nation to raise and exert its sea power, the fact that Japan has little land and very limited resources makes it ill-fit as a candidate for sea power according to the Mahanian idea. In terms of physical conformation, Japan’s tiny landmass means a lack of natural resources and fuel, while its population, high for its size, is insufficient. These factors combine to mean that while a short term war and victory is completely possible, anything that extends for a longer period of time is not. The wars fought by Japan in the early modern period, the first Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese war have been relatively short, each lasting for about a year. The fact that the Russo-Japanese war almost bankrupted the Japanese economy, with a cost of 2150 million yen, (Hunter, 1993) shows that Japan is not able to afford a long-term conflict with the United States.

When concerned with sea power itself, the Imperial Japanese Navy also makes a crucial

misinterpretation of the use and exertion of sea power. In Mahan's theory, sea power should be a means to achieve a set of goals, such as invasion or securing overseas possessions. However, the Japanese doctrine does not specify what should be done following the victory of a decisive fleet engagement. It would be difficult for Japan to force the United States into signing a peace treaty as the United States' holdings in Southeast Asia are only a portion of the total U.S. territories and by extension, its resources available for war. Even if Japan could manage to push to the U.S. West Coast and enforce a blockade that would deprive the U.S. of commerce and merchant capabilities, the Americans could still operate commerce and merchant routes on the East Coast and mount a counter-offensive based on their available resources. The sheer scale of the United States would overwhelm the idea of a Kantai Kessen-led victory.

CONCLUSION

The theory of sea power proves essential in both Japan's rise to a world power and its fall in the Second World War, affirming its value. Through the Kantai Kessen Doctrine, we can see how a naval power clings to a theory whose proper utilization contributes to the rise of Japan, and how its incomplete interpretation and in some cases, mis-interpretation leads to its fall.

While the Imperial Japanese Navy is gone, the ideas of Mahan remain influential to this day, exerting long lasting influences on the ideas of the British, later the Americans, and now the Chinese Navy.

REFERENCES

- Chesneau, R., & Kolesnik, E. (Eds.). (1979). *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1860–1905*. London: Conway Maritime Press.
- Evans, D. C., & Peattie, M. R. (2012). *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press. (Original work published 1997)
- Ford, D. (2007). US NAVAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE FLEET

DURING THE WASHINGTON TREATY ERA,c.1922–36. *The Mariner's Mirror*, 93(3), 281–306.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2007.10657036>

Hunter, J. (1993). *The Limits of Financial Power: Japanese Foreign Borrowing and the Russo-Japanese War*. Praeger.

Kaminer, M. H. (1964). MAHAN'S CONCEPTS OF SEA POWER: A lecture delivered at the Naval War College on 23 September 1963. *Naval War College Review*, 16(5), 15–30. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/45236517>

Stille, M. (2014). *The Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing Co.

Yoshihara, T., & Holmes, J. R. (2006). JAPANESE MARITIME THOUGHT: IF NOT MAHAN, WHO? *Naval War College Review*, 59(3), 22–51. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26396743>