

# Continental Versus Maritime Strategy: A Requiem

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*"A knowledge of the evolution of strategy is not merely the gratification of antiquarian predilection but a record of lessons to be learnt by the managers of conflict".*

## STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

The great age of discovery was essentially the adventure to discover sea routes to ancient lands. The Sumerian expeditions to the Persian Gulf, the flowering of the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro civilisations and the efforts of Queen Hatsheput of Egypt to connect the Nile to the Red Sea were possibly the earliest strategies of utilising the seas for the movement of merchandise and men.

The Greeks spoke of the application of naval resources to political purposes as early as 430 B.C. and coined the term 'Thalassocracy' which Thucydides defined as 'the use of the seas for military purposes'. The overseas expeditions of Alexander the Great, the exploration to the Red Sea during the reign of Ptolemy I and the commercial treaty between Seleucus Nicator and Chandragupta Maurya extended the use of the seas to cover commerce, conversion and conquest.

During the Tang, Sung and Ming dynasties, the Chinese traded with East Africa and their oceanic activities reached their zenith during the seven expeditions of the Court eunuch, Cheng-Ho whose motives were, however, restricted to glorifying Emperor Yung-Lo than for any predetermined strategy for colonisation or establishing commercial outposts. But suddenly in the mid-15th century, they prohibited all ocean activities as they felt that it was a drain on their coffers with no real benefit to China. Hence, the knowledge and expertise of Shipbuilding and navigation, so assiduously built up over centuries were deliberately extinguished and paradoxically China became the victim and not the exponent of sea power in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Indikon continued to be the Eldorado of the ancient world, which the book of Genesis described as the 'Garden of Eden' lying eastwards. Therefore, it was the Europeans who energetically searched for the Orient. In 1485,

Bartolameu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope thus freeing the dependency on Arab middlemen to transit the overland route to the Red Sea. Christopher Columbus discovered America and Henry Cabot made a land fall in Newfoundland. Magellan completed a round the world voyage. As was prophesied, "an age was coming when Tiphys will disclose a new world and Thule will no more be the ultimate"! The carriage of goods in the Indian Ocean passed to Arab navigators who transported merchandise from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and thence to the exotic Orient. Along with trade, Islam also went leapfrogging along the coast and soon the 'Crescent' stretched from Mauritania to Manila.

This movement by sea was further encouraged by the Islamic tenet of 'Haj' whereby all Muslims were enjoined to visit Mecca at least once in their life time. The English, by their navigation Acts, also insisted on the transport of goods in British ships and encouraged the eating of fish on Fridays thereby promoting a reservoir of ships and sailors. But the Hindus, on the other hand, believed that even crossing the Kalapani (seas) would result in the ostracism from their faith! Such factors were the genesis for the evolution of maritime strategy which Alfred Mahan, the evangelist of sea power in the colonial era, attributed to six ingredients:

The first ingredient was Geography which was a country's location astride sea lanes and in the proximity of important trade routes and also close to profitable fishing grounds.

The second ingredient was the physical conformation of the country with well located harbours, the lack of which was one of the reasons for the defeat of the Russian Fleet after their long voyage from their western ports at the decisive battle of Tsushima off their east coast. It was similarly enunciated by the 'Lancaster equation' that regional powers had a 3:1 advantage over external power as shortening of the arcs of operations was an inbuilt force multiplier.

The third ingredient was possessing adequate territory to act as a strong economic base for a nation's sea power.

The fourth and fifth ingredients were in today's parlance, human resource development for manning the ships in the hostile environment of the high seas.

The last ingredient was the comprehension of the Government to utilise sea power to achieve their national aims.

## THE PORTUGUESE AS CENDENCY

In 1494, Pope Calixtus III, by the Treaty of Tordesillas, divided the undiscovered world between Portugal and Spain by a line from the North Pole to the South Pole passing West of the Azores. Portugal was accordingly granted the Papal exclusivity to the Indian Ocean. Vasco-de-Gama in his second voyage to India, bombarded the major entrepots, looted Arab vessels and returned to Lisbon with a large booty. The voyage of Francisco de Almeida which followed resulted in the defeat of the Mameluk-Gujrati fleet off Diu and the conclusion of trading treaties without capturing territory. It was however, Alfonso de Albuquerque who captured the choke points of Socotra, Aden, Hormuz, Goa and Malacca and imposed 'Res Nullius' in the Indian Ocean. This pattern of maritime strategy of winning decisive naval battles in the Atlantic for establishing colonies in the Indian Ocean continued throughout the colonial era.

However, the Papal Bulls dividing the Oceans in favour of Spain and Portugal thwarted the oceanic ambitions of other rising maritime powers such as Holland, France and England. The Dutch East India Company therefore commissioned in 1601, Hugo Grotius, the father of international law, to publish his book 'Mare Liberum' (freedom of the seas) in which he contested the Portuguese claim to exclusivity by reasoning that the open seas were the common heritage of mankind.

Twenty five years later, an Englishman, John Seldon in his book 'Mare Clausum' (Closed seas) however, sought to uphold the concept of 'Res Nullius' (exclusivity) in view of Britain's growing interest in harvesting the seas around their small island. Although basically the two doctrines appeared to be opposites, yet in retrospect there was less conflict as 'Res Communis' (belonging to all) broadly applied to the High seas and 'Res Nullius' to the territorial water which was in a way the forerunner of the present ocean regime.

## PAX BRITANNICA AND INFLUENCE OF SEA POWER

The island nation of Britain had perforce to depend on her navy from the Elizabethan age of sail where the burning issue of maritime strategy was whether to seek out the Spanish Armada or remain in the English Channel to repel a Spanish invasion. Hawkins suggested an attack on their assembly point at Carthagena while Drake, who alternated between being 'free booter' and a servant of the Crown, carried out a successful raid on Cadiz. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in turn heralded the advent of sea power which became the lynch pin of British maritime strategy primarily due to the excellence

of the Royal Navy's ship borne gunnery' as demonstrated time and again during the Anglo-French wars by Nelson's decisive victories on the Nile and at Trafalgar which enabled Clive to defeat Dupleix in India.

Pax Britannica was based on the strategy of capturing the choke points of Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong and Freemantle which, with the advent of steam, became the 'Imperial Coaling Stations' and armament depots over which the sun never set.

These 'strategic keys of the Empire' in turn enabled Britain to impose their 'Res Nullius' in the Indian Ocean just as the Portuguese had done a century earlier. It was only with the liberation of 44 maritime states at the end of the Second World War that this exclusivity was demolished and Britain withdrew whatever token naval forces that were located in this region.

It is also of interest to note that the Government of India, until as late as 1939, continued to pay £ 1,35,000 to the British Admiralty for the maritime defence of India and even the small supportive Bombay Marine which later became the Indian Navy was controlled by the British Admiralty and not by the Viceroy. One will further observe that no decisive naval battles were fought in the Indian Ocean and therefore no worthwhile ship-of-the-line was based in this region. Hence the German armed merchantmen Emden and Karlsruhe were successful commerce raiders with the former even bombarding the Presidency city of Madras! On the other hand, it was the British Indian Army that conquered territory from Mesopotamia to Singapore and provided the 'two edged sword' that held the Empire together for nearly a century.

#### THE HEARTLAND STRATEGISTS

Sir Halford Makinder, the noted British geographer and one time Director of the London School of Economics enunciated the thesis in 1904 that in view of the fast developing network of communications such as roads and railways, a continental power with a large land base was a 'Pivot State' which could dominate the world. He added that with an effective railway system, a continental nation was less immune to blockade. For example, the opening of the Mount Cenis and St. Gotthard tunnels in Europe transformed the market flow of Mediterranean fruits and vegetables. Again the Trans-Siberian railroad revolutionized world trade. Further the Prussian General Staff turned railway

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\* It is of interest to mention that Britain appropriately named their gunnery training establishment at Portsmouth, HMS. Excellent, through whose portals have passed out Chiefs of Naval Staff in contemporary navies as also Indian naval officers who have since become Governors and Industrialists.

time tabling into a work of art by transporting over a million men to both the Austrian and French frontiers. The Indian Railways and road transport also built up an impressive track record during the Indo-Pakistan conflicts. Mackinder, further predicted that as there was very little of the world to conquer, every explosion of social forces would in future take place in an enclosed environment which in turn would neutralize the advantages of sea power.

This logic was highlighted by the German Professor of Geography and Military Sciences, Dr. Carl Haushofer who lent support to the 'Heartland' logic, albeit to popularise Nazi Germany's ideology of 'Lebensraum' or 'living space' for invading Europe, which unfortunately partly discredited Mackinder's prophetic prognosis that a land power with a strong industrial and technical base would be able to defeat a sea power unless it was also supported by a credible resource infrastructure. The two strategies of 'Heartland' and 'Rimland' or rather 'Continental' and 'Maritime' were therefore commonly likened to the Elephant and the Whale. Hence, military thinkers such as Sir Julian Corbett defined maritime strategy 'as the principle of governing a war in which the sea played a substantive part' but added that 'as man will continue to live on land, this is where the final decision will be made'. Corbett also emphasised that in land warfare the object is the seizure and holding of enemy territory while in naval warfare, it is to gain and secure the use of the seas in order to maximise pressure on the enemy.

Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, who incidently was the first Commandant of the Imperial Defence College, London challenged the more extreme 'blue water' navalists who were pre-occupied with winning a decisive victory and hence tended to neglect the more vital requirements of war at sea such as defence of shipping, blockade, mining, harassment, amphibious operations and submarine warfare.

The French Admiral, Raoul Castex also emphasised the eternal struggle of the sea against land and opined that it would not be Hitler's Germany as prophesised by Haushofer but Russia and the Asian heartland, with their vast land resources, that would determine the future course of history. Hence Mackinder, who advocated demography and geography as major factors for big power status proved to be a more clairvoyant prophet than Mahan who was perhaps so engrossed with the colonial past that he failed to visualise or comprehened the future trends in naval warfare.

#### THE EMERGING OCEAN REGIME

Further, the new laws of the seas accepted by the majority of the nations as late as 1982, after nine years of acrimonious negotiations, extended

the Territorial waters to 12 miles from the earlier 'cannon shot rule' of 3 miles; the contiguous zone to 24 miles and the Exclusive Economic Zone to 200 miles for the exploration and exploitation of living the non-living resources which included fishing, hydrocarbons and polymetallic nodules. This brought nearly 37% of the world's ocean area, which is roughly equivalent to the total land mass of our planet, into some sort of national jurisdiction which further blurred the boundaries between maritime nations.

In turn, this also ushered in a de-facto arms control and deprived the larger maritime countries from utilising the indivisibility and earlier pervasiveness of the seas for extending their own self-appointed role as world policemen by exercising gun-boat diplomacy to influence both their clients and adversaries. Maritime strategy therefore continued to encompass an enlarging spectrum of additional responsibilities such as the protection of off-shore assets, the delineation of maritime boundaries, control of international straits, jurisdiction over the sea bed, dumping of nuclear wastes, oil spillage, the rights of submarines to transit submerged, zone of peace etc.

#### FUSION OF CONTINENTAL AND MARITIME STRATEGIES

The fusion of sea and land strategies became even more pronounced in the arena of conflict as maritime strategy had wider and far reaching international ramifications. Further, in the management of conflict, the aircraft carrier and nuclear submarine became the major arbitrators for sightless wars. Hence, naval engagements, as Admiral Gorshkov pointed out, became associated with land operations and for ensuring trans-oceanic communications. A fusion of land and maritime strategies in view of the increasing radius of action of aircraft also became inevitable and this was accelerated by the revolutionary technology of 'fire and forget' tactical, cruise and ballistic missiles.

Consequently, both strategies were effected by the technological revolution in the management of conflict which in scope and depth changed not only war at sea but also the very nature of war itself. Conflict containment was transformed from 'chess' to 'poker' to use a descriptive metaphor as bids were doubled and re-doubled even before the hand was dealt! Further, mind boggling technology and the emerging international order resulted in a new bidding convention where the four aces were land and ocean resources, hitech, industrial infrastructure and financial strength. These trumps in turn galvanized the hitherto dormant states with heartland resources to challenge the rimland nations which for four hundred years had used the seas to their advantage for commerce and colonisation.

Secondly, this marrying of technology and finance to exploit the sea

bed, which is largely weighted in favour of developed nations has resulted in the creation of an International Sea Bed Authority with a 36 member council and an Economic Planning Commission to analyse the supply and demand of raw material from the sea bed; a Technical Commission for the transfer of technology and scientific data; a Rules and Regulation Commission and a Tribunal for settling disputes.

Thirdly, the emerging pulls and new tension points have led to international groupism such as the Land Locked and Geographically Disadvantaged group; the Coastal states, the Strait states, Archipelagic states, Oceanic states, the Great Powers etc., who all continuously utilize the power of the sea to display, deter, and persuade others to fall into line with their policies and perceptions.

Fourthly, weapons have accelerated from chemical explosion to nuclear fission; propulsion has changed, from oil to gas and enriched uranium: warheads have advanced to computerised imaging and nuclear detonation and human sensory organs have been vastly augmented by electronics, superconductors and satellites. Mobile platforms in international waters can now launch weapons with a 'one shot-kill' to destroy targets far inland. Similarly, land based inter-continental missiles in hardened silos can obliterate whole cities thousands of miles away. Above all, Star Wars cannot differentiate between land or sea boundaries. And finally, fission has catapulted nuclear strategy into yet another league.

Therefore, maritime and continental strategies have fused as they are invariably part of a three dimensional envelope as seen in Korea, Vietnam, Falklands, Gulf, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Lebanon. Hence, there is perforce more cooperation than competition between the 'Heartland' and the 'Rimland' as only big countries with large Gross National Products can afford to maintain effective Defence forces. The 'heartland' has literally taken to the sea and the whale in turn has been exhibiting preponderant mammal characteristics! Hence, this synthesis in contemporary strategy will perforce be national or regional where the forces of development, defense and diplomacy will play significant roles for nations to achieve their economic, geopolitical and sociological goals.