Geopolitics: Banyan

Chasing ghosts

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The notion that geography is power is making an unwelcome comeback in Asia

A CENTURY ago the ideas of an American naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan—pal of Teddy Roosevelt, inventor of the term "the Middle East", advocate of American expansionism in Asia and father of the modern American navy—were much in vogue among military strategists and great-power leaders. Now they are back in fashion again, this time among Asia's rising powers.

Mahan was a founding father of geopolitics, in particular the notion that geography—poring over maps—should inform foreign policy more than any other consideration. It was the wine-dark sea that interested him most. His book, "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History", was self-fulfilling, helping sea power shape history, though not for the better. Mahan concluded that command of seaborne commerce was the key to winning wars, and that what was needed was an "overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it". Wilhelm, the German Kaiser, loved the book, once saying he was trying to learn it by heart. The naval arms race between Germany and Britain that followed was both catastrophic and avoidable.

The understanding of sea power has since evolved, yet Mahan is now hugely admired in Asia's two most populous powers. Banyan was recently in Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue, run by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London think-tank. It seems Britain's former naval dominance of Asia has been forgiven or forgotten (or perhaps is recalled with admiration), for this forum is where defence types now get together with old friends and future foes. And whenever Banyan prodded a military man from India or China, out leapt a Mahanite.

For China's strategic planners, securing sea lanes against hostile powers has become perhaps the chief preoccupation. For India's, it is the growth of China's presence in its backyard, in and around the Indian Ocean. In both countries Mahan is pressed into service in one planning paper after the next. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara of the United States Naval War College have followed the uses and abuses of Mahan. He is often selectively quoted, suppressing his equal emphasis on peaceful commerce. There is also this dictum: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century. The destiny of the world will be decided in these waters." Both Chinese and Indian papers quote it. But it is a fabrication; Mahan never wrote it.

That Asia should be looking to the sea makes sense. Threats to the two biggest countries historically came from their Central Asian hinterlands. But in terms of the spread of commerce, culture, religion and empire, Asia's is a largely maritime history, carried on

the monsoon winds. Asia's modern "miracle"—economies plugged into globalised networks of supply and demand—is essentially a littoral story too, even when it falters, as now. A remarkable sight in Singapore is possibly the largest fleet ever gathered: hundreds of supertankers and bulk carriers from around the world, lying idly at anchor.

Despite the global slump, Asian growth continues. More than four-fifths of crude oil bound for China crosses the Indian Ocean before passing through the narrow Malacca Strait. Vast ship-borne imports of iron ore, coal and bauxite make up other raw ingredients for Chinese growth. India imports four-fifths of its oil, mostly from the Persian Gulf, plus liquefied natural gas from Qatar and Indonesia. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Kaplan, an American journalist, whose poring over maps also suggests Mahanite tendencies, describes the whole Indian Ocean seaboard as "a vast web of energy trade". Global energy needs are expected roughly to double by 2030, with India and China accounting for nearly half of the new growth in demand. Maritime security concerns are inevitable and legitimate.

The danger comes when concerns are amplified or imagined, and hitched to Mahanite prescriptions. The chief threats to peace in Asian waters come from non-state or pariah-state actors: Somali pirates, North Korean nuclear smugglers, water-borne jihadists, drug- and people-traffickers. For Chinese strategists, however, the threats are still America and India. In Singapore Robert Gates, America's defence secretary, met his Japanese and South Korean counterparts, to reassure them in the face of North Korea's nuclear bluster. Yet a Chinese general disapproved of the meeting and bluntly told Banyan that America's alliances in North-East Asia were intended to threaten China.

Too much latitude

Other strategists gaze at maps and conjure up evil shapes. For Japanese imperialists (also Mahan fans), the Korean peninsula was a dagger at Japan's heart; for Chinese strategists it is a threatening "bridgehead". As for the Indian subcontinent, it is, in this Chinese analysis, "akin to a massive triangle reaching into the heart of the Indian Ocean" or, like Japan and Taiwan, "a giant and never-sinking aircraft-carrier". India, in turn, espouses its own "Monroe doctrine", demanding that outsiders keep out of its backyard. So it decries China's "string of pearls" (roads, pipelines and ports being built in friendly countries around the Indian Ocean) as a provocation. Rivalry is helping drive a build-up of naval arms: three new aircraft-carriers for India; new destroyers, submarines and hints of an aircraft-carrier programme for China.

Mercifully, it is not all preordained to end in a rerun of 1914. The task of economic development concentrates Chinese and Indian minds at home. Smaller Asian navies are expanding as a counterbalance to the big powers, and they have an interest in keeping hands off the choke-point of the Malacca Strait. And America remains the defining force in Asia, able for now to enforce the peace. But, even if history never repeats itself, the persistence of Mahan's doctrines suggests the past likes to have a try.