

# China's Naval Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Turn to Mahan

James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara

Reviewed by Jack McCaffrie

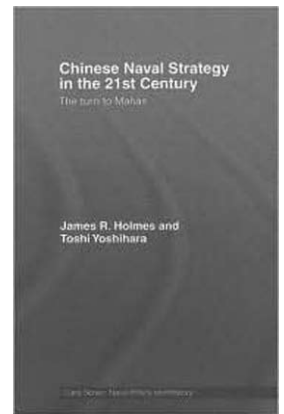
*China's Naval Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is a slim yet substantial volume written by James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, scholars in the US Naval War College's Strategy and Policy Department. It reflects the current US concern with China's growing economic, diplomatic and military strength, especially as it relates to China's Navy. The book has four main themes: China's turn to the sea, the influence of Mahan on Chinese naval strategists, how China's navy might develop and finally, how the US might respond.

Traditionally a continental power, China has recently become much more attentive to its maritime interests. Holmes and Yoshihara ascribe this change to several factors, one of which is the current relatively benign state of China's land borders. Major maritime factors include China's growing reliance on trade for its vital energy supplies, and the importance of Taiwan as a means of permitting or denying China's access to the Pacific Ocean. According to the authors, however, the turn to the sea also came about through the ability of Chinese Navy leader Liu Huaqing to cast off Maoist Army-dominated defence philosophies in the 1980s and bring credibility to the concept of offshore defence.

Liu Huaqing was primarily responsible for the modernisation of the Chinese Navy and for making concepts of sea power acceptable in China. Holmes and Yoshihara explore at length Mahan's influence in this process, specifically referring to his inspiration of the development of the US, German and Japanese navies at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The authors argue that each of these navies used Mahan's ideas selectively, with theory supporting pre-conceived arguments for more ships. The authors suggest that Liu and others have done the same in China: so, Mahan is an important influence, but by no means the only one.

They also link Mahan's view that the Caribbean was vital to the US, with their claim that China's local seas are equally vital to its maritime interests and should be treated as a single entity, in which Chinese sea power should prevail. Holmes and Yoshihara are concerned, however, that one element of Mahan's work that seems to have struck a particular chord in China is the most bellicose-sounding, which equates 'command of the sea to overbearing power that closes the maritime common to an enemy flag.'

Thus, Holmes and Yoshihara are led to consider how China's navy will develop and what the implications will be. Much of the discussion focuses on whether China will aim to become a true 'blue water' navy and whether it will concentrate on being a regional force, as opposed to a global one. Inevitably, perhaps, there is mention of the first and second island chains; geographical constructs which for some time have described (accurately or otherwise) Chinese naval ambitions.



There is repeated reference to Taiwan (within the first island chain) which Holmes and Yoshihara claim is the key to China's naval ambitions. Control of it would extend China's maritime frontier, would place China astride Japan's trade routes and, in their view, would significantly complicate US strategic security concerns in East Asia. While that may be an overstatement, control of Taiwan would provide some strategic advantages in China's quest for security of its maritime trade. The authors note that Chinese naval strategists consider achieving 'absolute control' within the first island chain – that is, regionally – and do so in terms of having 'command of the commons'. The consensus is that Chinese naval development is aiming in the first place to produce forces capable of achieving this level of command, by ensuring that the Chinese Navy can keep the US Navy at bay. This is reflected in the priority being given to building a force of capable diesel-powered attack submarines.

The book ends with a set of conclusions and recommendations, the essence of which is that the US must remain engaged in the Asia-Pacific region and will need a balanced strategy, able to adjust to China, whether it develops benignly or otherwise. Of particular significance also is the judgment that to deal with China the US Navy will need to have more, diverse and less costly ships.

This is an important book, not least for proposing a historical foundation for China's ongoing naval expansion. In claiming Mahan is the builder of that foundation the authors do not, however, suggest that he is entirely responsible for today's Chinese naval outlook. It may still be too soon to know just how much we may be able to thank Mahan for the rise of China's Navy and to what extent other (especially Chinese) influences are at play. Nevertheless, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is a very useful companion to Bernard Cole's *The Great Wall at Sea* and should be particularly useful to both naval historians generally and analysts with a specific interest in China and its navy.

Historians and analysts in good standing with their banks will have little difficulty in arranging the personal loans needed to buy this book. One has to wonder at the point of producing useful works such as this and then pricing them beyond the reach of most individual readers. ♦

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