The Sea-based Commonwealth

Norman Friedman

On 25 April each year Australians and New Zealanders celebrate Anzac Day. They remember their armed forces, and particularly the day on which combined Australian and New Zealand forces entered combat together for the first time at Gallipoli in 1915. A few wonder why men from the Western Pacific should have been sacrificed to what one New Zealand newspaper columnist recently called 'a dynastic dispute' over who would run Europe, hence clearly of no inherent significance to New Zealand. This history matters to us now because the issue is really one that concerns the nature of a sea-based commonwealth, such as the one the United States currently heads.

The short answer to the columnist's question is that New Zealand enjoyed the freedom and prosperity it did (and has since) because it was part of a successful global commonwealth held together by the sea. If the 'dynastic dispute' in Europe had gone Germany's way, even distant New Zealand would have felt the resulting chill. That might have meant domination by the victorious Germans or even the dissolution of the defensive ties that kept New Zealand out of a developing Japanese sphere of control in the Far East. In either case, life in New Zealand would have changed dramatically.

The larger answer, which certainly matters to us, is that a sea-based view of the world is dramatically different from what a map shows. We commonly talk about how sea-based forces can roam much more freely than their land-based equivalents, but there is more to be said. In a very real sense countries are united, not divided, by the sea. In this sense New York is closer, say, to Europe than to Cincinnati. The closeness is not, obviously, in travel time, but rather in the ease with which heavy weights can move. When the US Navy was being reborn in the 1880s, its advocates often wrote about the possibility of invasion from Europe. Many scoffed at such a possibility; surely the Atlantic was a sufficient barrier. More than half a century later, the United States managed to mount an entirely credible threat to invade Japan across a much wider ocean.

A colleague at a think-tank once remarked that the important thing about American military logistics was that, the greater the distance, the stronger US forces became. It was easier for the United States to maintain half a million troops in Vietnam than for the Soviets to maintain significantly fewer in Afghanistan, which on the map is a lot closer to Moscow than Vietnam is to the United States.

Because this reality is not at all obvious, and because the United States and its allies have faced no real opposition at sea since 1945, it is easy to forget. Forgetting includes neglecting our respective merchant marines, on the theory that ships can always be hired in an emergency. But what happens if the merchant ships face real threats? What if the governments whose flags they fly oppose what we are doing?

Forgetting can also mean imagining that we can project power without having to deal with opposition anywhere beyond the coast. For example, much of the US Navy's essential support is now provided by Military Sealift Command ships that have been disarmed so that they can be treated as merchant ships and manned by civilians. That is probably reasonable as long as we face enemies incapable of systematically detecting ships much beyond the horizon. The situation may change as potential enemies realise their limitations, and as they buy longer-range sensors such as high-frequency surface-wave radars (which the Russians have been advertising, and the Chinese apparently buying).

Then there is in the character of the relationship between members of the commonwealth. Many writing about the current US position refer to the old British Empire. They forget that there were actually two empires, one formal (colonies and protectorates, plus self-governing dominions which later became effectively independent) and another informal, tied economically and, to an extent, politically to Britain, but by no means compelled to support the British. When writers argue that economically the British Empire was a loss-maker, they limit themselves to the formal empire, and probably to the colonies.

The informal empire was a very different proposition. It was the world that kept the British economy (with its adverse balance of payments) alive through a combination of trade and returns on British investment. British military power, as manifested in the formal empire, kept the informal empire alive, not least because governments enjoyed important advantages from the degree of protection British power provided.

During the 19th century, the United States was part of the informal British Empire. One reason the United States was able to develop so rapidly was that it did not have to defend its coasts because the Royal Navy, for entirely British reasons, in effect blocked European threats. For example, the Monroe Doctrine was underwritten by the Royal Navy, as the United States had no way, until the end of the 19th century, to prevent even the weakest European powers from seizing new colonies in the Western Hemisphere.

Membership in (and benefits from) the informal empire did not require that the US government support the British; the British blocked European access to the Western Hemisphere for their own reasons, and they invested heavily in the United States for similar reasons. When World War I broke out they discovered, to their discomfort, just how informal the relationship was. The US government took a very long time to decide that it could not afford the consequences of British defeat, and in the process it forced the British to liquidate much of their economic position in the United States.

For their part the British were unable to convince the Americans, particularly those far from the sea, that their war was really ours as well. Just like that current New Zealand columnist, we found it difficult to realise that the ocean, in this case the Atlantic, was a highway rather than a barrier and that what happened in Europe in effect happened across a border, not in another universe. The ocean is a barrier only if it is turned into one by a superior sea power.

The sea power point of view helps explain Winston Churchill's decision to fight on in mid 1940. Historians generally miss the meaning for sea power, so they compare Britain, fighting alone, to the power of Germany dominant in Europe, Churchill, however, understood that Britain headed a global empire as well as an informal one that benefited greatly from its existence. As long as Britain's navy remained dominant, it retained access to the resources of the empire and, for a heavy price, to those of the informal one as well. Churchill understood, moreover, that the United States could not tolerate a Europe united against it.

The United States is now where the British once were. The US has no interest in formal empire, having learned the British lesson that it is much more expensive than it is worth. Informal empire and commonwealth are far more to America's taste, but they require much more in the way of diplomacy, both public and private. Those who have benefited from US protection may well fail to understand that without it their existence could be much more difficult. They are unlikely to feel motivated to sacrifice more for their own defence, or to support the US in what they see as distant ventures of no direct importance. Thus an American history of the Cold War must include Vietnam, but a European one generally will not. To be fair, the Europeans will tend to include the wars that ended their own imperial presence in Asia in the Cold War, whereas the US government of the day wanted to separate these conflicts from the Cold War it was fighting in Europe. European governments that have involved themselves in Iraq have generally suffered at the polls because their populations see no connection between events there and their own concerns. That is surely largely the fault of the United States, just as it is the US administration's fault that many Americans no longer see a connection between events in Iraq and the threat from Islamist terrorism.

The New Zealander's column is a warning to us. In 1914 the British government simply told Australians and New Zealanders that they had to fight for King and Country, not really understanding that to those living in the self-governing dominions their country was no longer the United Kingdom, but rather Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa. There was, it seems, little or no attempt to explain the links binding together this commonwealth and even less attempt to explain links to the members of the informal empire. Without explanation, World War I really could look like nothing more than a local European dispute. With the explanation, it is obvious that whatever happened in Europe was of global significance, because at the time Europe was the centre of global power. Sea power made that power truly global.

Because the United States cannot compel it's allies to help, it has tried somewhat harder to explain what the American-led commonwealth means to them, but the US must do more. Most of all, this requires the US to explain sea power in its broadest sense, the sense that matters most, the sense in which it binds disparate countries together. ◆

Dr Norman Friedman is an internationally known American strategist, military technological analyst, and naval historian. This article is reprinted with permission from the June 2007 issue of 'Proceedings' the magazine of the US Naval Institute.
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