

Southeast Asia in Great Power Naval Strategies

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Abstract

This paper, which is a preliminary think piece or work scope, will explore a naval strategic approach to the regional history of Southeast Asia in the period 1930–89, as a way of transcending the borderlines between national histories. Rather than writing regional history as a number of parallel national histories it should be possible to apply a comprehensive regional perspective. One way of doing this is to use Christopher Goscha’s network approach (see his paper), another to focus on the role of regional institutions such as Admiral Mountbatten’s war time SEAC, the later SEATO and, from 1967, ASEAN. A third is to consider great power naval strategies.

Governments in command of huge navies will always to some extent allow naval strategic concerns (offensive capabilities, security of bases, control of sea-lanes) to influence their foreign policies, but navies are extremely costly and demand strong accompanying aviation. Naval power is therefore also volatile. There have been frequent changes in the balance of naval power in and around the South China Sea during the period under study. The paper will divide the period into phases in accordance with shifting power relations. An important insight is that naval power cannot automatically be translated into power in adjacent territories. Navies can move and act quickly and demonstratively, but are not good at sustaining drawn out struggles against a determined land-based adversary.

The paper will try to envisage the South China Sea as a kind of Asian Mediterranean, and explore the shifting naval strategies of regional and outside powers in either determining or mirroring significant regional developments.

The naval perspective

Let me first emphasise the word ‘perspective’. What I’m after is not a traditional naval history of ship construction and deployment, command structures, battles, operational doctrines and inter-service rivalries. Instead I propose to employ a sea-based strategic perspective on international political history. This means that as a historian, I want to place myself in the position of naval commanders and strategic planners, and try to look at political developments the way they saw them—or might have seen them. I shall then also want to know to what extent they influenced political processes, events and decisions.¹ When I say ‘political’, I’m not thinking of politics in

¹ It should be emphasised that the author has not been trained as a military historian. He is a political historian who has become interested in naval and military history because the strategies, pursuit and outcomes of wars and preparation for wars have had a tremendous impact on political developments. This means that some of what is said about naval affairs may be naive, poorly phrased, inaccurate or

a narrow or national sense, but rather about what political scientists call 'international relations', with particular emphasis on security.

Sea power is different from land power because it is:

- not dependent on a civilian population or public opinion in the areas where it operates, but only in the country to which the navy belongs,
- more dependent on technological sophistication and air support,
- more costly,
- more mobile, thus making it possible for a distant power to dominate regions far away,
- less constant, more volatile,
- dependent on ports and bases rather than territories.

Thus naval power cannot automatically be translated into power in adjacent territories. It can be projected along coasts and up rivers of sufficient depth, but not for long periods of time if the country around is controlled by a hostile power. Navies can move and act quickly and demonstratively, but are not good at sustaining drawn out struggles against a determined land-based adversary. This is what makes naval power so fluid, and this is why it may be useful for historians as a barometer of overall power relations.

'Southeast Asia' and the 'South China Sea'

From a standard political perspective, Southeast Asia is a region consisting of ten states all of which, if Hun Sen sorts out his relationship with Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy, will soon be members of ASEAN. From this perspective, the main contemporary narrative is that of the construction of national states and of ASEAN itself. From a geographical perspective, it is customary to distinguish between continental and archipelagic Southeast Asia. From a maritime perspective, however, inspired by Fernand Braudel and Anthony Reid, emphasis will be on the straits and seas: the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, Macassar, Balabar, Mindoro, Luzon and Taiwan, the Gulfs of Thailand and Tonkin, and the Java, Flores, Banda, Moluccas, Sulawesi, Sulu and South China Seas. The latter of course is by far the largest and most significant.

There are many ways to conceive of the South China Sea, depending on which fleet or state you belong to. For navies from outside the region, it will mainly be a sea-lane of communication (SLOC) between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. From a strictly Vietnamese perspective it will be the 'Eastern Sea' and, correspondingly, the 'Western Sea' for Filipinos and the 'Northern Sea' for the people of northern Borneo and Natuna. If we take a more comprehensive Southeast Asian perspective, the South China Sea can be viewed as a 'Southeast Asian Sea' or, with President Ramos' security advisor José Almonte's somewhat self-contradictory term, the '*maritime heartland* of Southeast Asia'. From the Chinese perspective, the sea is precisely what's in its Chinese name (*Nanhai*: the Southern Sea) i.e., China's own southern sea. The English name (The South China Sea) tends to confirm this. The Southeast Asian

even mistaken. The author would therefore be grateful if readers with a better knowledge of military affairs would be willing to assist him in learning about military affairs and, notably, about linkages between military strategy and political processes, events and decisions.

and Chinese perceptions both presume a sharp delimitation between two regions, called Southeast and Northeast Asia, or Southeast Asia and China. It might also be possible to ignore the dividing line between “Southeast Asia” and “China”, and consider the South China Sea as the central basin within a trans-national maritime region that encompasses most of Southeast Asia as well as Hainan, Taiwan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Fujian. This basin might be called ‘The Pacific Asian Sea’.

Such different, colliding perceptions are at the core of much strategic thinking and political conflict in the region, and lie behind the bitter struggle over the Paracel and Spratly island groups. Economic, military and conceptual stakes are all high in the South China Sea. Maritime rivalries have gone on through the whole of the century, over such issues as the utilisation of bases and ports, security of SLOCs, occupation of islands, islets and reefs, repression of piracy, exploitation of fish stocks, and exploration of oil and gas. In addition to the ‘hard-core’ economic and military rivalries and the competing definitions of national sovereignty, there is also a softer struggle over how to apply international law, and how to organise environmental protection. My proposal is to approach the 20th century history of Southeast Asia and its relationship to Northeast Asia from the perspective of the contest in the South China Sea, and try to establish how shifting power relations have enhanced one or the other of the perspectives cited above.

Periodisation

There have, as mentioned, been frequent changes in the balance of naval power in and around the South China Sea during the period under study, which may be separated into four phases: 1930–49, 1950–70, 1971–91, and 1992–.

If the 1930–49 period is considered on its own naval terms, the main story will be the rise and fall of the Japanese navy. In a long term perspective, however, the more salient feature of this period is the rise to supremacy of the US Navy through the defeat of the Japanese, exhaustion of the British and exclusion of the French and the Dutch. The naval conferences after the First World War, when Japan acquired the former German possessions in the Western Pacific as mandates, had established a regional condominium of five navies: the British, US, French, Dutch, and Japanese. The former British-Japanese alliance had been terminated at US insistence, and the United States obtained European support for imposing on Japan strict limits to the number of ships it was allowed to possess. Japan broke with these provisions in the 1930s and launched a programme of rapid naval buildup, linked to its war against China and mounting conflict with the United States. In the late 1930s Japan established naval supremacy in the Japan Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea, occupying and establishing bases along the Chinese coast, on Hainan, and in the Paracels and Spratlys (Taiwan, of course, had been under Japanese occupation since 1895). Subsequently, in 1942, Japan established a short-lived but complete hegemony also in the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagoes and in the Straits of Malacca. The sinking, in January 1942, of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* off British Malaya, and the subsequent invasion of Singapore, were devastating blows to the Royal Navy, from which it only seemingly recovered in 1945. In effect of the sterling crisis, Britain soon had to downgrade its naval commitments east of Suez. Singapore remained an important port, but the Royal Navy’s role in the region was mainly as an appendix to its strategic partner, the US. In the early phase of the Pacific War, the French and

Dutch navies had been neutralised or defeated and, after a brief return, were again forced to leave their colonial bases in 1949–54.

In the 1945–49 period, the big global question was what the US would do with its naval supremacy. It acquired bases in Okinawa and the Philippines and enjoyed access to facilities in Singapore. These bases and base rights were part of a global system, which was envisaged by Washington in two different ways: either as a means of policing the world through patrolling of sea-lanes and keeping up a capability for punishing obstructors to the freedom of global trade, or as forward bases in a global contest with the Soviet Union as the leader of Eurasian communism. The main proponent of the latter view was James Forrestal (Secretary of the Navy 1943–47 and of Defense 1947–49), and it was this view that won the day in the Truman administration. Once the cold war was a fact, however, a rivalry emerged between the US Navy and the US strategic Air Force over the proper way to defeat the Soviet Union in the coming Third World War. It could be done either through a nuclear bombing campaign or, as argued by Admiral Radford, through the deployment of aircraft carriers in all of the main seas around the Eurasian continent, with a strong naval aviation. This rivalry had not yet been resolved by 1949, when the Soviet Union exploded its own nuclear bomb and the communists gained control in China.

In the 1950–70 period, starting with the completion of Mao's victory in China and with the US-Japanese peace treaty of 1951, US supremacy went unchallenged at sea. No other navy could match it or even obstruct its movements. It kept its bases in Okinawa and the Philippines, co-operated closely with Taiwan, and acquired the former French base in Camranh Bay of South Vietnam. The US Navy could go where it wanted, but US maritime power was under challenge from land-based communist armies in China, Korea and Indochina. The massive gains of Soviet-inspired movements in the second half of the 1940s had led to a great communist scare in the United States, which involved itself in a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union, and in two limited land wars in Asia, Korea 1950–53, and Vietnam 1965–73. The former ended in stalemate, the latter in defeat. The US Navy played an important operational role in both of these conflicts, and also in the Taiwan Straits crises, but it lacked a coherent naval doctrine. Under General Eisenhower's presidency 1952–60, the US Army and strategic air force dominated military thinking in Washington, and the navy became more of an auxiliary service. The US approach to China and Southeast Asia in this period was dominated by the intellectual straitjacket of the domino theory, which remained in force even after the Sino-Soviet alliance had collapsed because China, in the 1960s, was the more aggressive of the two former communist allies.

In the 1970–91 period, beginning with president Nixon's visit to China and ASEAN's declaration of Southeast Asia a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), a drastic change in the alignments of the great powers contributed to a resurgence of naval strategic considerations in Washington and to give the US Navy a clear strategic focus. This was embodied in the new maritime strategy adopted under the Reagan presidency in 1982 which, like the strategy followed in 1947–50, aimed at establishing the strongest possible offensive capability vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Since the 1960s the Soviet Union had been engaged in an ambitious naval programme, and the South China Sea now also became an arena for its attempt to challenge US naval supremacy.² The two events that signalled this new development were the Sino-US détente of 1971, and the conflict emerging at the middle of the decade between Vietnam and China. This conflict prompted Vietnam to offer naval

² See Derek da Cunha, *Soviet Naval Power in the Pacific*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990.

facilities in Camranh Bay to the Soviets. The Soviet-Vietnamese challenge to US supremacy ended in 1990, when Gorbachev drastically reduced the costly naval programme and more or less withdrew from the South China Sea. The whole attempt to challenge the US had been extremely costly for the Soviet Union and also, in a political sense, for Vietnam, who was tied up with losing great power and thus isolated from the rest of the region. The PRC, however, was able to utilise détente with the United States to provide room for building up its own navy, to occupy the whole of the Paracels in 1974, and to capture a number of Spratly islets, after defeating Vietnamese forces there, in 1988. The period also saw the resurgence of a small, but technologically highly advanced Japanese navy which, however, was precluded from moving as far west the South China Sea.

Since 1992, US future supremacy has been in doubt for several reasons. Firstly, much of the rationale behind the US commitment disappeared when the Soviet naval challenge to US naval supremacy went away. Then also the Philippines closed down the base in Subic Bay, and the population in Okinawa started actively to oppose the continuation of US base rights there. Also, in the beginning of the Clinton presidency, Washington seemed more concerned with economic liberalisation and human rights diplomacy than with more realist or geopolitical considerations. And finally, the growth countries of East Asia could now afford to build up navies themselves. Local powers went to sea. For these reasons, there was a tendency during the first half of the 1990s to write off US supremacy in the long term and to talk about a power vacuum which might be filled by China. Events during the 1994–98 period, however, seemed to turn the tide in favour of the US again. First China provoked fears in ASEAN by building military installations on Mischief Reef in 1994, leading other countries in the region to favour a strong continued US presence. Then China launched a missile test directed against Taiwan just as Taiwan held elections, thus providing an opportunity for Washington to demonstrate its naval superiority by deploying a task force in the Taiwan strait. Then came the regional financial crisis in 1997, which forced several countries to scale down their military modernisation plans. In consequence the US may remain dominating somewhat longer than expected during the beginning of the decade. If we look at developments within military technology, there are also factors working in different directions. The factor that enhances continued US dominance, is that the US has a strong lead in applying information technology to arms. The US has a tremendous lead in developing intelligent missiles. On the other hand the intelligent missiles may constitute a long term threat to the US Navy. If land-based powers get hold of such technology, they can sink US aircraft carriers with land based missiles. This may lead to a situation where US carrier groups no longer dare to go close to foreign shores.

Why a naval perspective

What can a naval perspective contribute to our general understanding of the political history of Southeast Asia? My hypothesis is that naval strategic considerations and naval institutions have played a more prominent role than generally assumed in determining great power actions and decisions in the region around the South China Sea. This may be the case for some of the major decisions by French, British, Dutch, Soviet and US policy makers which figure in our general historical accounts. Notably the role of the US Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) and the strategic concerns of his command in US decision-making may have been underestimated by

diplomatic historians. The reasons why the importance of naval strategy may have been underestimated could be:

- a) A general tendency to consider each national history as separate.
- b) A tendency to think about regional affairs in the context of the global cold war with its nuclear weapons-based political strategies of aligning nations with either of the two super powers, rather than as a naval contest for supremacy in local maritime territories.
- c) The fact that diplomatic archives, organised in accordance with a filing system based on nation-states, are opened to researchers much earlier than the naval archives, whose filing systems are based on theatres of command. Thus the major syntheses are written on the basis of diplomatic archives before the naval archives become accessible.
- d) The status of naval history as a specialised field which is often not taken seriously by the most prominent historians of international affairs.

To test this hypothesis it is necessary to explore the role of naval strategic factors in determining certain actions and decisions. Which major policy decisions could possibly be better explained if we take naval strategic concerns and the influence of naval institutions into account? Let me just list some possibilities:

- The Japanese motive for attacking and occupying much of Southeast Asia in 1941–42 had strong naval strategic motives, and the navy actively pushed for the attack to take place. This, however, is already well known.
- The French Vichy government's decision to allow Japanese occupation of Indochina in 1941 was to some extent motivated by the need that was felt to keep a French naval presence in the Pacific. The French Governor General during the Pacific War was an Admiral. So was his successor, whom de Gaulle sent out to Indochina in August–September 1945.
- Admiral Halsey's raid of the Indochina coast in early 1945 played a crucial role in provoking the Japanese decision to dismantle the French Indochinese regime, thus paving the way for the Vietnamese August Revolution. This is something I have explored in my doctoral thesis, but will also continue to explore.
- The US decision to allow the French return to Indochina in 1945, and the Dutch to Indonesia, might also have some naval motives. During the war, Admiral Leahy was one of the main contacts for French diplomats in Washington.
- The French decision to confront the Viet Minh in 1946 and to refrain from negotiating with Ho Chi Minh in 1947 was partly grounded in a stated need for guaranteeing the security of the French naval bases.
- The British decision to postpone independence for Malaya (with Singapore) while conceding independence to Burma, India and Ceylon in 1947–48 may have had something to do with the need to keep Singapore as the main base in the region for the Royal Navy.
- The Dutch insistence on keeping West Irian out of Indonesia in 1949 may have been partly motivated by a desire to keep some Dutch naval presence in the Pacific.
- The US decisions to support Taiwan in the Taiwan Straits crises of 1954 and 1958 had clear naval aspects.
- The US Navy's attitude to the formation of SEATO 1954–55 should be explored.
- The US decision to abstain from intervening at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was a rejection of a bombing plan proposed by Admiral Radford.

- The decision by the US, Britain, Taiwan and the Philippines to sponsor rebels in Sulawesi and Sumatra in 1958 could have something to do with a perceived need to ensure the security of SLOCs.

- The Soviet decision to withdraw aid to Vietnam in 1963, the US decision to intervene in Vietnam 1964–65, and the Soviet decision to resume aid to Vietnam in 1965 should also be explored from a naval strategic perspective.

- The US attempts to find a way out of the Vietnam War as from 1967–68, and the Nixon doctrine of 1969 may to some extent have been based on strategic considerations. After the defeat of the communists in Indonesia in 1965, the defense of South Vietnam could no longer be considered vital by the US from a strategic point of view. The domino theory had perhaps made sense, but no longer did so after October 1965. Interestingly, Robert S. McNamara regrets in his book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* that the US administration did *not* put more emphasis on realist assessments of this kind, which could have led to withdrawal from Vietnam much earlier.

- The Soviet decision to sign a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Vietnam in November 1978 was followed up with strong naval deployments when China invaded northern Vietnam in January 1979. This has been studied by Derek da Cunha. His studies could now perhaps be followed up in Soviet naval archives.

- The Chinese decision to adopt a new law on sovereignty in 1992 and the laws that are currently being prepared about sovereignty issues in the South China Sea are evidently connected with the Chinese programme for developing a blue water navy.

- The Chinese decision to improve relations with Taiwan after the presidential elections of March 1996 and to seek improvement of Sino-American relations may also to some extent be motivated in a realisation that it will take several decades before the Chinese navy can have any hope of confronting the US Navy successfully.

These are only some of the significant policy decisions on which naval strategic concerns have had a more or less significant bearing. My intention is to dig into the background for some of these decisions and try to determine the relative weight of naval strategic motives and of naval institutions in determining the outcome. Which of the decisions should I choose? Let me also add a methodological question for consideration in the EUROSEAS panel: How can we measure the weight of naval strategic considerations relative to other motives (political commitments, economic interests, etc.)?

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