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ALFRED THAYER MAHAN'S
STRATEGY OF FORWARD DEPLOYED MARITIME FORCES

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UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

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"Our historical reliance on the seas for our economic and security requirements, coupled with the fact that the majority of conflicts will be located along the littoral drives us toward the development of a strategy that is maritime in nature..."

The above quote from General A. M. Gray in May 1990, could just as well have been made by the eighth Commandant of the Marine Corps, Colonel Charles G. McCawley, during conversations with Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan at the Naval War College in 1890. Mahan would certainly have agreed with both Commandants as evidenced by his statement, "seapower is more than navies for it includes not only the military strength afloat ... but also the peaceful commerce and shipping" An analysis of the applicability of Mahan's thoughts to the modern scene will support that they are just as relevant in today's age of advanced technology as when first written. This can best be reinforced by explaining Mahan's concept of maritime power in contemporary terms.

Maritime power is a comprehensive and complex system that contains two subsystems: seapower and seaforce. Each of these subsystems has its own specialized attributes. The whole, in its operation, reflects a national maritime policy or strategy. This is the systematic maintenance and use of maritime power to support and advance national well being under conditions of international competition. Maritime power is generated by an economic activity that produces surpluses for exchange to be disposed of through seaborne trade. This process requires the necessary infrastructure of ship-building, ship repair, cargo handling, etc. for its operation. Without such machinery in place, domestic and foreign markets cannot be developed, cargoes cannot be found, ships cannot

be moved, and whatever maritime potential a nation may have cannot become a reality.

Seapower is a specialized subsystem of sea movement. Its basic element is merchant shipping. With the necessary supporting facilities mentioned above, seapower can be presumed to compete successfully in world commerce. The sea movement capacity of seapower systems steadily adds to maritime wealth and influence, and the end product is maritime dominance. Seapower is an exposed system, open to every variety of interference, from political and economic impediment to armed attack. It requires organized protection.

Seaforce is a subsystem designed primarily for the support and defense of seapower. While seapower is shipping, bases and their supporting fixtures, seaforce is a navy. It is an armed force available to guard and keep open communications between points of safety and home bases. However, as the special uses that could be made of seapower came to be more fully appreciated, policy makers tended to give a lower priority to the primary and original function of seaforce - the support and defense of seapower.

In Mahan's view, maritime power is a system formed of distinct but interlocking elements working to advance a nation's position in the world. It works as a stimulus to a nation's total capacity to produce and influence its esteem throughout the world. It uses its seapower component offensively in commercial competition. It uses its seaforce component defensively in a world of emerging conflict. Mahan constantly stressed that what he described was a

tightly knit system of facilities, commercial carriers, and naval fleets and that no one of these elements could be allowed to become inadequate without the system losing its effectiveness.

Mahan's concepts remain as current today as they were over one hundred years ago. Just a year or so ago who would have imagined the Marshal of the Soviet Union visiting military bases in the United States and attending a garden party at the Commandant of the Marine Corps' house, or the United States Marine Corps Band on tour in the Soviet Union. In spite of the revolutionary changes in international relations there are three things that will remain constant in the foreseeable future and thus secure Mahan's thoughts on maritime power. First, the United States will continue to rely on the sea for its economic and political livelihood. Second, the Soviet Union will be the only country in the world that has the capability to challenge our way of life. And third, independent of the actions of the United States and the Soviet Union to reduce tensions, the rest of the world is becoming more economically interdependent, but more politically independent.

The United States has always been and will always be tied to the sea. Our geopolitical position is that of an island nation, with fraternal neighbors at our borders while linked to the rest of the world through multiple overseas alliances and maritime trade routes. We have spent the greater part of our nation's history looking at the oceans as a buffer, protected from direct threat by a continental land power. Yet, we are linked to the rest of the globe by trade, alliance, and - yes, threat - a situation that

requires forceful, intelligent use of the seas.

Maritime power is at the heart of our ability to influence international events by virtue of politics, economics, strategy and culture. Since the end of World War II, we have been deeply involved in a system of multiple alliances stretching across the seas. As the leader in these global maritime coalitions, the United States must operate fleets capable of sailing in strength on every ocean.

Maritime power enables us to quickly bring to bear mobile, flexible forces during international crises, and helps form the bond that holds our maritime coalition of free nations together. We are bound to the seas by our involvement in a complex and global economy. Petroleum, strategic minerals, high technology imports, and many other vital products and raw materials must come to us via the seas. And most of the areas wherein these resources are found are either on the world's littorals or reachable from them. How important is this? America's economic fate is inseparably linked to the fortunes of trading partners, energy suppliers, capital markets and foreign firms across the world. The industrial process has become so intertwined that some essential military hardware, the F-16 fighter for example, cannot be produced in this country without foreign made components.

Naval forces have traditionally been the forces of choice in response to threats to our national interests. They have been used in about eighty percent of the more than two hundred occasions since World War II in which U.S. forces have been called upon for

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rapid response. Most of the capitals of our allies and our trading partners are located on the periphery of continental land masses. If the United States is to effectively participate in mutual defense of its own and its allies interests, we must have forces either deployed close to or capable of rapidly closing upon regions of potential conflict.

In the past several years, the United States has placed increased emphasis on the role of naval forces in forward deployment because of the changing international environment. Since 1950 there has been a sixty percent decrease in the number of overseas basing facilities. However, there has been no decrease in our overseas interests. To the contrary, the United States relies more heavily on overseas trade than ever before. Forward deployed naval forces give us the flexibility and mobility to protect these interests. Maritime forces operate in international waters and are independent of basing agreements and overflight rights.

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Mahan has told us that given the relation between wealth and maritime commerce, the sea is inevitably the major arena of competition and conflict among nations aspiring to wealth and power and that an ability to control movement on the sea is chief among the purely material elements determining the comparative power and prosperity of nations.

Does the United States conform to Mahan's concepts today? We still produce and exchange products. Shipping, the instrument of the exchange of products, remains available. However, in the one

hundred years since Mahan wrote on the use of the sea, United States colonies and bases or nationally held points of safety have been reduced instead of enlarged as Mahan recommended to protect the operations of shipping. This reduction of safe havens has been filled by a great increase in the importance of Mahan's last requirement for maritime power - the need for an armed force, a forward deployed maritime force, to be available to guard and keep open the lines of communication. Achievement of these interdependent elements is the key to understanding the policies and actions of nations that use the sea and for whom the use of the sea is vital to national existence.

Yes, Mahan's thoughts on maritime power are still relevant today. The one weakened concept of maintaining overseas havens is replaced by the premise of forward maritime deployment. It is the heart of a transoceanic strategy which intends to influence events at sea and on shore through command of the seas. Just as the forward presence of United States naval forces has contributed to the deterrence of conflict with the Soviet Union, it has enabled us to promote regional stability throughout the world. Carrier and battleship groups, along with forward deployed Marines, have come to represent the commitment and resolve of the United States to preserve regional stability and freedom of the seas.