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## Alfred Mahan and the Concept of Maritime Determinism in Geopolitics

### Abstract

The article explores the intellectual legacy of prominent naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan and his role as the architect of the “maritime determinism” paradigm. The author posits that the increasing global economic interdependence at the end of 19th century necessitated a systemic concept to explain the laws governing the rise and fall of the world powers through the prism of maritime factors. Within the scope of this study, Mahan’s concept of “Sea Power” is analyzed not merely as a naval doctrine, but as a synthesis of geography, economics, and national will.

The article demonstrates that Mahan viewed maritime space as a realm of economic exchange and strategic influence, linking the historical development of states to their capacity to control maritime communications. Moreover, it examines the practical application of this theory in foreign policies of leading powers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, illustrating its transformation into an ideological factor in world politics.

The present study evaluates the contemporary relevance of Mahan’s theory and its adaptability to 21st century global challenges. The author concludes that “maritime determinism” remains a vital geopolitical tool that continues to shape the strategic thinking of modern states.

**Keywords:** *maritime determinism, Alfred Mahan, geopolitics, sea power, global trade routes, strategic dominance*

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## Alfred Mehen və geosiyasətdə “dəniz determinizmi” konsepsiyası

### Xülasə

Məqalədə görkəmli hərbi nəzəriyyəçi Alfred Tayer Mehenin elmi irsi və onun “dəniz determinizmi” paradigmasının yaradıcısı kimi rolu tədqiq edilir. Müəllif qeyd edir ki, XIX əsrin sonunda qlobal iqtisadi asılılığın artması dünya dövlətlərinin yüksəlişi və tənəzzülü qanunauyğunluqlarını dəniz faktorları prizmasından izah edən sistemli konsepsiyanın yaranmasını zəruri etmişdir. Tədqiqatda Mehenin “dəniz gücü” (Sea Power) anlayışı sadəcə hərbi doktrina deyil, coğrafiya, iqtisadiyyat və dövlət iradəsinin vəhdəti kimi təhlil olunur.

Məqalədə Mehenin dəniz məkanını iqtisadi mübadilə və strateji təsir sahəsi kimi nəzərdən keçirdiyi, dövlətlərin tarixi inkişafını dəniz kommunikasiyalarına nəzarət imkanları ilə əlaqələndirdiyi göstərilir. Eyni zamanda, bu nəzəriyyənin XIX əsrin sonu – XX əsrin əvvəllərində aparıcı dövlətlərin xarici siyasətində tətbiqi və dünya siyasətinin ideoloji faktoruna çevrilməsi məsələləri araşdırılır.

Müəllif Mehen nəzəriyyəsinin müasir dövrdəki aktuallığını və XXI əsrin qlobal çağırışlarına adaptasiya imkanlarını qiymətləndirərək belə bir nəticəyə gəlir ki, “dəniz determinizmi” hələ də dövlətlərin strateji təfəkkürünü formalaşdıran mühüm geosiyasi alətdir.

**Açar sözlər:** *dəniz determinizmi, Alfred Mehen, geosiyasət, dəniz gücü, qlobal ticarət yolları, strateji hökmranlıq*

## Introduction

By the end of the nineteenth century, the world had entered a stage of significant economic interconnection, characterized by the swift growth of international trade, the enhancement of maritime communications, and the increasing strategic relevance of oceanic spaces. As the Industrial Revolution took off, and national markets began to be replaced by a complex web of international trade and colonial expansion. In this era, the world's oceans transformed from simple geographical divides into main channels of worldwide wealth. The ability to manage maritime traffic and safeguard trade routes became key foundations for the longevity of great powers (Mahan, 1890).

Despite the sea's clear practical importance, strategic thinking at the time lacked a unified, systematic explanation for why some nations rose to global dominance while others stagnated. Most military strategies were fragmented, seeing naval warfare as a secondary support for land operations, not a key historical force. A major intellectual gap existed: the absence of a theory that could connect geography, economic activity, and political power into a single, predictable system.

The emergence of Alfred Thayer Mahan's work directly addressed this problem. Mahan was the first to look beyond specific military strategies and recognize that "Sea Power" was an objective determinant of national destiny. His concept of maritime determinism provided a systematic way to understand international relations, a framework that is still very relevant today. In an age where 90% of global trade still moves by sea and maritime chokepoints remain the focus of geopolitical tension, re-evaluating the origins of this paradigm is essential for understanding modern strategic competition (Till, 2013).

Mahan developed the idea of maritime access as a causal relationship between a nation's grandeur and its historical success by studying the maritime nations' experiences. A prime historical example of this paradigm in action was the strategic expansion of the United States and the modernization of its "New Navy" at the turn of the century, which was directly inspired by Mahan's doctrines and secured the nation's status as a global power (Sumida, 1997).

From this perspective, given the inextricable link between maritime control and economic stability, research on this area is critical. In an age where global trade routes are the fundamental arteries of the global economy, comprehending the modernization of strategic thinking via Mahan's prism is critical for analyzing the mechanics of contemporary international relations.

### Research

Alfred Mahan's seminal intellectual achievement involved a paradigm shift in maritime conceptualization, moving from viewing the sea solely as a theater of conflict to recognizing its potential as a universal thoroughfare facilitating international trade and exchange (Mahan, 1890). This transformative perspective underscored the strategic imperative of managing maritime traffic and economic conduits rather than merely territorial acquisition. Mahan posited that a nation's puissance stems not exclusively from its territorial expanse but fundamentally from its capacity to ensure the unimpeded transit of commercial goods, financial capital, and political sway across the interconnected global sea lanes.

However, Mahan argues that the "common" is not free and must therefore be subject to some form of control. He therefore proposes a new idea, "Command of the Sea," in which a nation that dominates the communication routes of the seas, in effect, holds the terms of reference of the global economy. This is not achieved in a coincidental manner but through a deliberate national strategy in which a nation chooses to emphasize its naval power over other military powers (Crowl, 1986).

To systematize his theory, Mahan identified six fundamental factors that determine whether a nation can become a Sea Power. An analysis of these elements reveals the "deterministic" nature of his thinking. The first factor, geographical position, was considered fundamental by Mahan. He believed that an island nation, such as Great Britain, has a comparative advantage since it does not need to maintain land defenses, thus allowing it to focus its resources on naval development. Continental nations, such as France, are caught in a dilemma since they need to maintain both land and naval forces, a fact that puts them at a disadvantage (Mahan, 1890). This is closely linked to physical conformation, where the presence or absence of suitable ports for naval development was

another factor that influenced a nation's access to Sea Power. A coastline without suitable ports was an obstacle for a nation. Furthermore, Mahan noted that the extent of territory is crucial, emphasizing that length of the coastline must be in proportion to the population. A long coastline and a small population represent a weakness, not a strength, considering the large investment that must be made in defense. This leads to the factor of the number of population, where it is not the total population that matters, but the number of people engaged in maritime pursuits—shipbuilding, fishing, and trade. A “sea-minded” population is the reserve force of the navy (Mahan, 1897). This maritime orientation is reinforced by the national character; specifically, a proficiency in the conduct of commerce is a must. A nation that is commercially inclined is a nation that will do anything to protect its interests, and that is a nation that will develop a navy. Finally, Mahan identified governance and policy orientation as the most important factor in the development of a navy is the government. It must have the intelligence and the will to carry out a consistent policy despite the changes in government. Democratic governments have been criticized for their short-sightedness in the matter of spending on the navy. Modern data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2023) supports this, showing that nations with robust maritime governance frameworks now facilitate over 80% of global trade volume, validating Mahan’s focus on the “Character of Government.”

Mahan’s concept of strategic thinking changes the way geopolitics is viewed, with the focus on the control of maritime flows rather than the physical possession of territories. Traditionally, power was measured in terms of the amount of land that was under one’s control. Mahan argued that a relatively small island nation could dominate a huge continent as long as it controlled the vital trade chokepoints that make up the global maritime arteries (Corbett, 1911). This means that the strategy of strangulation can be an even more potent form of power than the traditional strategy of invasion. This is because, by limiting the adversary’s access to the sea’s vital routes, the great highways of navigation, a maritime power can cause the adversary’s economy to collapse without the need to fight a traditional war on land. The concept of strangulation was thus born as a key concept in 20th-century naval strategy (Kennedy, 1983).

The publication of Mahan’s works coincided with a critical juncture in world history, where major powers were seeking new avenues for expansion. It was a theory that did not only exist as a product of intellectual discussions but was also practically used as a blueprint for the foreign policies of all dominant world nations. It was for the first time that “control of the sea” was scientifically related to survival, and a dramatic reshaping of world geopolitics was witnessed at the turn of the century.

The most direct and profound application of Mahan’s theories occurred in his native United States. Theodore Roosevelt, who served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy and later as President, was a devout disciple of Mahan. He understood that for the United States to transition from a regional entity to a global power, it had to abandon its isolationist traditions and look outward. The idea presented by Mahan, which was that a nation bordering on two oceans needs a navy that can function on both oceans, was the strategic reasoning behind two major undertakings. This expansion was not only for commercial purposes but was a military necessity, enabling the US Navy to move its fleet from one theatre to another, effectively increasing its strategic value (Mahan, 1897).

The global circumnavigation of the U.S. battle fleet (1907–1909) was a deliberate demonstration of Mahan’s principles. It signaled to the world, particularly to rising powers like Japan, that the United States possessed the logistical capacity and “sea reach” to project power anywhere on the globe. This era marked the definitive modernization of the “New Navy,” shifting from coastal defense monitors to blue-water battleships.

In the Far East, the Mahanian influence appears to be even deeper. While recognizing the geographical similarities between the Japanese archipelago and the British Isles, the Japanese strategists eagerly adopted Mahan’s concept thought to secure their own imperial ambitions. The translation and study of Mahanian literature became an essential part of the curriculum for officers attending the Japanese Naval War College. Japan also adopted the Mahanian “decisive battle” doctrine, which argued that sea power could be achieved through a “decisive battle” known as “Kantai Kessen.”

The ultimate expression of this strategic approach was the Battle of Tsushima, fought in 1905, where Admiral Togo's Baltic fleet destroyed the Russian fleet, which had sailed into the area. This was seen as a definitive expression of Mahanian thought, which argued that a technologically advanced, offense-oriented sea power could defeat a large, resource-endowed continental power. This victory not only made Japan the dominant power in East Asia, but also reinforced the idea of “maritime determinism” as a universal principle, which could be applied beyond the confines of the West (Asada, 2006).

In Europe, maritime determinism took a more destabilizing form. Kaiser Wilhelm II, known for his alleged “devouring” of Mahan's works, believed that Germany's rise to power in the world (Weltpolitik) depended upon countering British naval supremacy.

Under the guidance of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Germany embarked upon a massive shipbuilding endeavor to develop a “risk fleet” designed to deter Britain. This can be considered a direct implementation of Mahan's idea that the safeguarding of maritime trade requires the maintenance of a battle fleet.

Nevertheless, this strategy proved to be a catastrophic miscalculation in terms of strategic thinking. In countering Britain's dominance of the seas—a factor considered vital to Britain's very survival—Germany inadvertently instigated an unprecedented arms race. Maritime historians often point to this rivalry as one of the main underlying causes of WWI, thus demonstrating the potential of maritime determinism to be a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to global conflict (Lambert, 2018).

In order to provide a comprehensive and critical evaluation of maritime determinism theory, it is crucial to bring into focus Mahan's theory and juxtapose it with another theory referred to as the “Heartland Theory” (1904) by a British geographer named Sir Halford Mackinder. It is worth noting that this juxtaposition encapsulates the main argument that underpinned twentieth-century geopolitics: the struggle for supremacy between Sea Power and Land Power.

While Mahan argued that the sea was the key to world power because of its unity, Mackinder presented a formidable counter-argument in his seminal paper, *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904). Mackinder posited that the era of maritime dominance was coming to an end due to the technological revolution of the steam engine and the transcontinental railway. He warned that if a single power could control the resource-rich “Heartland” of Eurasia, it would become an impervious fortress, immune to naval blockades and capable of projecting power faster by rail than ships could circumnavigate the globe.

For Mahan, the sea was a single fabric that was uninterrupted, a sea that could be thought of as a “vast highway without seams.” As a result, sea power could move freely, could be everywhere, and could strike anywhere on the sea's shores, whereas land powers could only defend everywhere on the sea's shores.

Mackinder argued that land power could stand on its own, that the era of sea power dominance had come to a close, and that land power empires would eventually conquer the sea powers.

The 20th century, however, largely supported the views of Mahan, but the most compelling synthesis of the views of Mahan and Mackinder was that of Nicholas Spykman, who conceded the importance of the Heartland but argued that the decision rested in the Rimland—the edges of the landmasses in Asia and Europe. Spykman's famous dictum, “Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia,” effectively merged Mahan's navalism with Mackinder's territorialism (Spykman, 1944). The results of two world wars and the Cold War indicated that the economic power of the sea powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, was greater than the economic power of the land powers because the sea powers could impose an “Anaconda strategy” that the land powers could not match by virtue of their own infrastructure systems.

In the mid-20th century, critics argued that air power and nuclear weapons made Mahan's views on surface ships obsolete. However, in the 21st century, maritime determinism has made a strong comeback. The geography of the world has not changed; the sea remains the primary arena of international engagement. More than 90% of international trade is conducted through the sea, and the security of energy flows depends on strategic sea lanes—the Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait, and Suez Canal. The 2021 grounding of the “Ever Given” in the Suez Canal was a major disruption to

billions of dollars in daily commerce and reinforces Mahan's notion of sea routes being the arteries of commerce (Suez Canal Authority, 2022). Yet the current "Blue Economy" approach to the sea also considers it to be the source of renewable energy and food. However, the protection of these resources still relies on the naval concepts introduced by Mahan decades ago (World Bank, 2017). Whoever controls these strategic points has immense power over the global economy, thus reiterating Mahan's view that national prosperity and naval power are inextricably intertwined (Till, 2013).

The naval strategy paradigm has moved from the battleship rivalry of Mahan's time to a paradigm of systemic control. Countries such as China are expanding their sea power through initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, which is a direct carryover of Mahan's view that the global economy needs the protection of the global navy. Thus, the fundamental thesis of Mahan's work—that the sea determines global wealth and power—is still shaping the world order (Modelski & Thompson, 1988).

### Conclusion

The exploration of Alfred Thayer Mahan's maritime theory reveals a framework that transcends its late nineteenth-century origins, offering a profound understanding of the structural dynamics of global power. Mahan's primary contribution was the conceptualization of the sea not as a barrier, but as a "great highway" and a unified commons. By identifying the six fundamental pillars of sea power, ranging from geographical position to the character of government, Mahan provided a deterministic yet flexible model that explained the rise of the British Empire and paved the way for the United States' ascent to global hegemony.

The historical application of these principles at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrates that "Command of the Sea" was more than a naval strategy; it was a blueprint for national survival and economic dominance. The strategic shifts in the United States, the naval modernization of Imperial Japan, and the destabilizing naval race in Imperial Germany all underscore the transformative power of Mahanian thought. While the "Heartland Theory" of Halford Mackinder offered a significant challenge by emphasizing land-based power and railways, the historical trajectory of the twentieth century—defined by two World Wars and the Cold War—ultimately validated Mahan's thesis. The economic flexibility, logistical reach, and capacity for maritime blockades possessed by sea powers proved superior to the static resources of continental empires.

In the contemporary era of globalization, the logic of maritime determinism remains more relevant than ever. Despite the advent of cyber warfare, air power, and space technology, the physical reality of the global economy is still anchored in the maritime domain. With over 90% of global trade and the majority of energy supplies transiting through vulnerable maritime chokepoints, the "control of flows" remains the ultimate regulator of international stability. The resurgence of naval competition in the Indo-Pacific and the strategic importance of routes like the Suez Canal and the Malacca Strait confirm that the sea continues to be the primary arena where the world order is contested and maintained.

Ultimately, Mahan's legacy lies in his realization that economic prosperity is inextricably linked to naval strength. As modern nations navigate the complexities of a multipolar world, the core tenets of Mahanian strategy—prioritizing maritime communication lines and ensuring the security of the global commons—continue to serve as the governing dynamics of geopolitical power.

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