

The Future of Sea Power in the Western Pacific

American interests in the Western Pacific depend on sea power. Yet China views nearby U.S. sea power as a threat, a counterweight to its regional interests, and a potential barrier to its access to the world’s oceans, resources, and markets. China is expanding its sea power in East Asian waters, deploying advanced anti-ship missiles, submarines, and other capabilities that threaten the U.S. fleet. Because this vital region could become unstable or fall under China’s sway if U.S. sea power were to recede or become vulnerable, the United States will react to this challenge.

Thus, as David C. Gompert explains in *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*, a classic case of a rising sea power challenging an established one is shaping up in East Asian waters. Such rivalry can lead to confrontation, crisis, or war. Gompert applies the sea-power theory of American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, the history of three rivalries between established and rising sea powers, and current U.S. and Chinese interests and capabilities to propose how the United States can sustain its sea power and reach a modus vivendi with China in the region.

Previous Cases of a Rising Sea Power Challenging an Established One

Mahan’s theories grew out of his observations on how Great Britain’s Royal Navy enabled its industrial, commercial, and imperial success. Mahan concluded that sea power is key to world power and requires the ability to safeguard one’s own maritime access (sea control) and to prevent such access by enemies (sea denial). Mahan’s ideas shaped the great sea-power rivalries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were studied and applied by German and Japanese officers as well as by proponents of American imperialism, including Theodore Roosevelt.

The United States and Great Britain in the late 19th century provide one example of a rising sea power challenging an established one. The United States, having established continental control and industrialized its economy, turned to sea power in order to obtain possessions, achieve world power, and rid its hemisphere of foreign presence. Great Britain, then the predominant sea power, chose not to oppose growing U.S. sea power, partly because it faced more pressing challenges elsewhere and partly because of the two countries’ economic interdependence and convergence of interests, including in maritime security.

Key findings:

- U.S. interests and influence in the Western Pacific depend on sea power, as they long have. Yet China regards U.S. sea power as menacing and so is expanding its own in the form of advanced anti-naval and naval capabilities.
- This looming rivalry between an established sea power and a rising one has historical precedents, two of which—Britain versus Germany and America versus Japan—ended in war.
- To protect its interests yet avoid conflict, the United States should develop distributed, diverse, survivable forces while cooperating with its friends and, ideally, China, to manage regional maritime security.

Great Britain avoided conflict with the United States in part because it faced another rising sea power: Imperial Germany, which regarded British sea power as a threat to its overseas access and an impediment to becoming a world power. Britain regarded Germany’s hegemonic potential in Europe and its challenge to British sea power as a strategic threat. It responded by strengthening the Royal Navy and allying with its old enemy and Europe’s weaker power, France. The ensuing naval arms race and rising levels of Anglo-German animosity contributed to the conditions that led to World War I.

In a third example, Imperial Japan by the 1920s sought control of East Asian waters to acquire possessions, markets, and resources, so it relentlessly expanded and modernized its navy. Belatedly, the United States responded by increasing and deploying its fleet forward in the Pacific in the 1930s, posing a threat to the lifelines on which Japan depended to maintain its conquests and expand its war-making ability. Facing sea denial, Japan felt compelled to attack the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Of the three cases, the most encouraging, obviously, is the Anglo-American one, which ended in maritime coexistence, cooperation, and eventual alliance. The United States, however, is not about to defer to China in East Asia as Britain deferred to the United States in the Western Hemisphere.

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The more worrisome and perhaps more relevant case is the Anglo-German one, which ended badly, raising the question of why London and Berlin could not find a cooperative solution, given a common interest in maritime security.

Emerging Chinese Sea Power in East Asia and Potential Counters

The United States and China are economically interdependent and have convergent global interests, but they are at loggerheads in East Asia. While China has not embraced global sea power, it is moving from coastal defense to extending its naval reach into disputed water in order to protect regional trade routes. Of most concern, the Chinese military is exploiting information technology to greatly improve and extend its targeting of surface ships, especially U.S. aircraft carriers, with missiles, submarines, and cyber weapons.

Defending U.S. ships against extended-range missiles and quiet submarines is difficult, expensive, and probably futile in the face of China's accelerating, well-funded anti-naval build-up. With known technologies, neither ballistic missile defense nor anti-submarine warfare can keep pace with the offensive enhancements of such a large, capable, and resolute rival.

The U.S. Navy, in cooperation with the U.S. Air Force, is responding with "Air-Sea Battle" to counter China's anti-naval and other anti-access capabilities by targeting its "kill chain" of sensors and weapons. While this is a worthwhile option, it could become vulnerable to Chinese cyber attack, might require the United States to strike first or preemptively, and could be escalatory, in that most targets are on Chinese territory. A better approach is to take full advantage of networking technology and shift toward more distributed, numerous, diverse, elusive, small, long-range, and hard-to-find naval strike forces, while also exploiting drones and cyber-war. Yet even more distributed and less visible U.S. forces may become targetable. Moreover, the U.S. Navy is unlikely to shift rapidly to such survivable sea power, given fiscal constraints and institutional-industrial inertia. Meanwhile, the vulnerability of U.S. sea power will increase, and regional stability could suffer.

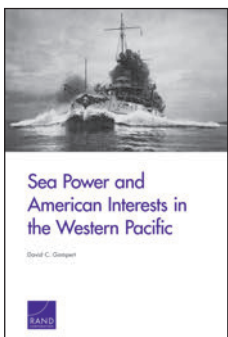
Options for Cooperation

Given technological trends, an unfavorable timeline, and the strategic importance of East Asia, the United States should also pursue a political alternative to sea-power rivalry, engaging its regional partners and, ideally, China itself in cooperative maritime security. Like the United States and other countries in East Asia, China depends vitally on the security of seaborne trade, which accounts for 95 percent of its total trade and nearly 50 percent of its economy.

The United States should propose an East Asian maritime security partnership, inviting all states that share its interest in assured access and passage to join. Such cooperation could be predicated on the norms that disputes should be settled nonviolently and that civilian shipping engaged in peaceful, peacetime trade should not be threatened. Realistically, resolving the region's complex maritime legal disputes should not be a precondition for the partnership, but a pledge to refrain from force should be.

Participation of other increasingly capable navies in the region could encourage China to join and bolster a multilateral approach to security. As China has become more powerful and assertive within the region, its neighbors have become more wary of it; fear of becoming isolated could cause Chinese political leaders to overrule military opposition to multilateral cooperation. While China's participation in an East Asian maritime security partnership would not preclude naval competition or conflict, it could reduce mistrust and mistakes that might trigger Sino-U.S. hostilities.

In sum, the United States should reduce dependence on concentrated surface forces, such as aircraft carriers, while pursuing a cooperative alternative to relations with the rising sea power. China and the United States have reason to avoid conflict in East Asia. Because technology is producing growing capabilities for sea denial and may deprive both powers of assured sea control, the pursuit of strategic advantage at sea may leave both with diminished maritime security. The United States has technological and political options at sea that can add crisis stability, lessen the intensity of rivalry, and reduce the risk of conflict, even as it shifts toward a more survivable posture that would enable it to prevail if conflict with China occurs.



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute and documented in *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*, by David C. Gompert, RR-151-OSD (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR151.html), 2013. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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