

World Strategy

# The rise and

By Paul Kennedy

*What do naval strategic planners in the one continent assume about the future of the world that the planners in the second continent do not?*

**T**O world historians, there is nothing more fascinating than to notice a coincidence or a disjuncture across space but within roughly the same time.

Was it just a coincidence, for example, that the new but fast-growing states of Germany, Japan, Italy and the United States "came of age" at the same time, after 1870 or so? And wasn't it an odd disjuncture that the political culture in Britain, France and America in the interwar years was so pacifist, whereas the mood in Germany, Italy and Japan was so aggressive and militarist, virtually making World War II inevitable?

Then go back in time and consider one of the oddest disjunctures in world history. In the very first decades of the 15th century, the great Chinese admiral Cheng Ho led a series of amazing maritime expeditions to the outer world, through the Straits of Malacca, into the Indian Ocean, across even to the eastern shores of Africa. Nothing at that time compared with China's surface navy.

Yet, within another decade, the overseas ventures had been scrapped by

high officials in Beijing, anxious not to divert resources away from meeting the Manchu landward threat in the north and about how a seaward-bound open-market society might undermine their authority.

Coincidentally, on the other side of the globe, explorers and fishermen from Portugal, Galicia, Brittany and southwest England were pushing out, across to Newfoundland, the Azores, the western shores of Africa.

While China's great fleets were being dismantled by imperial order, Western Europe was beginning to move into "new" worlds, full of ancient peoples and cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Any place vulnerable to Western naval and military power was at risk. Above all, as the American naval captain A. T. Mahan taught us over a century ago in his classic book, "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History" (1890), the West valued navies as the key to global influence.

So let us come forward to today's complex, fragmented and hard-to-understand world. There is occurring, most interestingly - and not covered (so far as I can see) by any of the world's main media outlets - another remarkable global disjuncture at work. And it involves, as it did six centuries ago, massive differences in the assumptions of European nations and Asian nations about the significance of sea power,

today and into the future.

Let me make clear that I am not talking here about American attitudes regarding naval power. The United States, with a relative maritime force-projection capacity that probably exceeds that of the Royal Navy in 1815, is not planning to do anything other than reinforce its naval muscle.

I am also not talking about Vladimir Putin's Russia. The Russian Navy has suffered many hard blows, severe

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cutbacks in spending and personnel, and the obsolescence of rusting warships over the past 25 years. But there is no doubt that it is rebuilding. It may not be able to come to the relative strength of the Soviet Navy in its heyday, the 1970s and 1980s. Yet Russia truly believes that it has to be strong at sea.

So, too, do the governments of the fast-growing economies of East and South Asia. On two recent visits to South Korea, both times to give lectures about strategic affairs, I was intrigued to notice that Seoul had a 15-year plan for the expansion of its



# and fall of navies

maritime power in all dimensions, including military capacities.

Right now, for example, South Korea is constructing three large destroyers that displace more than 7,000 tons and possess extremely powerful armaments. Clearly, these are not designed to stop little North Korean submarines from sneaking down the coast.

But, as the Koreans point out, Japan is in the midst of an even greater naval build-up. The 2006 publication of "The

Navy was in the 1890s. Just last month the Congressional Research Service, a body not known for hyperbole or dramatic statement, issued a remarkable 95-page report entitled "China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Navy Capabilities." The details are extensive, and look impressive. Perhaps the most important facts are tucked into the first footnote: "By 2010, China's submarine force will be nearly double the size of the US submarine fleet The

Military Balance," increasing "defense spending significantly during the current decade, with the navy receiving 'substantial infusions of new equipment.'"

But let us return to the European scene. Here the trend seems to be in the opposite direction, with naval budgets being held down and (given the inexorable rise in the cost of weapons systems and personnel) actual fleet sizes being reduced. The most publicized case here is the news that the Royal Navy may be planning to "mothball" many of its fleet of destroyers and frigates (which, being only 25 in number, is now less than half of Japan's total).

Angry Conservative members of Parliament are demanding a debate on the fact that defense expenditures represent a smaller percentage of GDP than at any time since the 1930s - and we all know what that implies. Those critics appear even more outraged that the French Navy now possesses more major surface combatants than Britain for the first time in 250 years.

Still, France's naval budget is not rising by very much, and the navies of Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands are also being held in check. Yet nobody in Europe, so far as I can see, is paying any attention to the naval arms race in Asia. And nobody in Asia is paying any attention to the severe retrenchments of maritime power that

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Military Balance" by the International Institute for Strategic Studies records that the Japanese Navy includes 54 "principal surface combatants" - that is, destroyers and frigates, warships that possess guns, missiles, torpedoes and depth charges. The Japanese, however, will point to the extremely rapid build-up of the Chinese Navy, which already deploys 71 destroyers and frigates, not to mention 58 submarines (compared with Japan's 18 subs).

Yet the Chinese naval build-up is only in its early stages, like, say, the US

entire Chinese naval fleet is projected to surpass the size of the US fleet by 2015."

We should note that this quotation actually comes from the American Shipbuilders Association, with its very distinct interests in this matter. And it is hard to believe that the US government would let such a dramatic shift in the naval balances ever come to pass. But one cannot gainsay the important fact that everyone in Asia, apparently, believes that it is vital to enhance maritime power. Even a smallish power like Vietnam is, according to "The

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are going on in Europe.

This leads to an obvious, final question: What do naval strategic planners in the one continent assume about the future of the world that the planners in the second continent do not? Why is Chinese public television showing programs about the rise of Elizabeth I's navy at the same time that the British Ministry of Defense is mothballing or scrapping warships with names that go back over 400 years?

Armchair strategists will rush in with many answers to that question: for example, that Asia is more likely to see interstate conflicts in the future than Western Europe, China is determined to curb US hegemony in the Pacific and everyone else is scared of China's military build-up, and, in any case, these faster-growing economies can afford both guns and butter. All of that may be true. But the plain fact remains that, in an age of great geopolitical uncertainties, the leading European nations are ignoring the ancient Elizabethan caution: "Look to thy Moat." Can that really be wise? COURTESY INTERNATIONAL

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