

# The Logic of American Strategy and War

by George Friedman - April 18, 2023

In recent weeks I have focused on the social and economic evolution of the United States. Obviously, we also need to discuss U.S. strategic policy. Domestic policy tends to be more dynamic than strategic policy, which follows from more persistent things like imperatives. The United States is secure from an attack on land. Neither Canada nor Mexico has the ability to wage or interest in waging a land war against the United States. Therefore, the fundamental threat to American national security must come from the sea. Still, American strategy has within it a logic. It lacks the cyclical logic of domestic politics but is shaped by the necessities imposed by place and enemies.

America's entry into World War I was triggered by a German attack on U.S. shipping. In World War II, Washington's key motive was the same. If Germany cut off lines of supply between the U.S. and Britain, it could isolate Britain and attack it at will. Having secured the Atlantic and a base of operations in Britain, Germany could threaten the East Coast. In the Pacific, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, if fought sensibly, could have secured sea lanes from Hawaii to the West Coast and possibly enabled Japan to impose its will there. Even the Cold War was primarily naval. Germany was indeed the line of contact with the Soviet Union, but the vital supply lines ran from the U.S. to Europe, and NATO could be crippled by cutting off those supplies. Toward that end, the Russians deployed submarines and supersonic anti-ship systems.

The Germans (twice), the Soviets and the Japanese each saw the defense of their nations as rooted in maritime war against the United States. The German failure permitted D-Day to take place, the Soviet failure made a Soviet ground offensive in Europe impossible, and the Japanese failure led to Hiroshima and the U.S. occupation of Japan. In each case, the ability of the U.S. to maintain lines of supply and block enemy attacks was the key to the defense of the United States and its economy, and in each case, American strategy was built on deterrence. In the event that U.S. security was not entirely at risk at sea, Washington created barriers to block enemy powers from moving assets toward Atlantic or Pacific ports. It was understood that the immediate threat might be trivial compared to the long-term threat. Therefore, it was essential to engage Germany as early as possible – to contain the long-term threat while it still entailed combating ground forces and before the sea threat had fully materialized. This was also critical in the Pacific against Japan. It should be noted that in Vietnam, where the U.S. had no land-sea strategy, matters ended badly.

In Ukraine, there is an element of this strategy. Russia, if it were to defeat Ukraine, would be at NATO's border and could attack westward. The U.S. is practicing a strategy of preemption at a relatively low cost in terms of U.S. casualties to prevent the very unlikely move of Russia to the Atlantic coast. Maritime action is used to drive back land forces. This was the strategy used against the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and it is now being used against Russian forces in Ukraine. In this use of sea power, there is significant indirectness designed to impose an element of risk on ground forces deep in their own territory. It is a strategy normally too subtle to easily see.

Therefore, U.S. naval strategy in Ukraine is designed primarily to block waterways that could facilitate Russian movement – namely the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. It is not the heart of the broader U.S. strategy.

It is with respect to China that this strategy is being most seriously tested. The primary strategy of the U.S. must be to maintain control of the Pacific and maintain lines of supply to allies to prevent an opening for China. The heart of the strategy is to apply varying pressures on China so that it is forced to balance and rebalance its forces. As an example, China's seizing Taiwan is not possible given the time needed for a task force to reach the Taiwan coast, during which it would be open to attack by the United States. This limits the ultimate Chinese threat to the U.S. coasts. Naval warfare (and here I include naval air power, as has been normal since World War II) combines two strategies, one limiting Chinese movement at sea and the other opening the possibility of threatening the Chinese homeland.

The Chinese constantly threaten Taiwan, but until now they have never acted because of the likely intervention of the U.S. Navy. The U.S. has a far inferior ground force – primarily to be transported by naval power, which would be a challenge – to pose a threat to a Chinese invasion. It is naval power that prevents Chinese action. There is a logic between the United States and China, a logic of geography, technology and fear that is in its way consistent and ties us in an internal cycle that naval war generates.

Adm. Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote the book on this strategy more than a century ago. It is a strategy that is still in place, replete with subtle interaction with land power. When U.S. military action was unsuccessful, as in Vietnam, it failed either because the terrain was not susceptible to naval power or because naval power was not used. However, as I have tried to show, U.S. warfighting strategy, particularly on the strategic level, has never changed. China is constrained by that power, Russia is blocked from effective use of waters on its periphery, and other hostile powers seek to avoid U.S. naval power, whereas the U.S. uses it as a central force.

The idea of a consistent domestic model is more difficult to grasp than that of a consistent military strategy. But the latter has a persistent reality of geography and a persistent solution of naval power aligned with technology and strategy. Even when the connection between naval power and a war deep on land seems to make that strategy pointless, there is constant pressure for the enemy to go to sea. The Soviet Union was forced to enter the North Atlantic as was Germany in spite of their focus on land operations. It is vital to understand the naval dimension of all American wars.

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