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Geopolitical thought

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Abstract - Alfred Thayer Mahan was a strategist and geopolitical thinker who redefined the role of maritime power in global competition. Through an analysis integrating geography, history, economics, and strategy, Mahan emphasized the importance of controlling sea routes for trade, security, and power projection. His works, particularly *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, influenced the naval policies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and other global powers, anticipating many contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Criticized for his alleged geographical determinism, his thought remains relevant in the context of globalization and the competition between terrestrial and maritime powers. His legacy is reflected in both military strategies and modern geopolitical theories.

Keywords: Maritime power, Geopolitics, Naval strategy

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Thayer Mahan was not merely a talented military strategist but a visionary capable of interpreting the dynamics of global power through the lenses of geography and history. His analysis, developed between the 19th and 20th centuries, represents a cornerstone of modern geopolitics. Mahan understood that the sea was not merely a boundary but an open gateway to opportunities—an invisible network linking peoples, economies, and strategies.

In an era of great technological and political transformations, Mahan outlined a vision that went beyond mere naval military power, integrating geography, economics, and culture into a comprehensive framework that anticipated classical geopolitical theories. His work, particularly *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, not only influenced the naval policies of the United States and the United Kingdom but also reshaped the way modern nations perceive the control of maritime communication routes as central to global competition.

THE SEA AS THE LIFEBLOOD OF POWER

For Alfred Thayer Mahan, the sea was not simply a place for navigation or a battlefield, but civilization's greatest thoroughfare. In a famous passage from *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), Mahan defined it as "a natural highway that allows men to move in any direction." However, this freedom is not absolute: certain routes, for geographic, economic, and strategic reasons, assume greater importance than others. Therefore, controlling these vital arteries becomes the core of competition among powers.

Mahan perceived the sea as the key to understanding the dynamics of global power. Maritime dominance was not solely a matter of military fleets but also economics, trade, and security. For a nation to prosper, it had to effectively exploit its maritime routes: the sea connects regions, resources, and markets, representing the beating heart of global commerce.

However, Mahan did not stop at economic considerations. He highlighted those geographic conditions—both physical and human—played a decisive role in determining a nation’s maritime power. It was not only about having access to the sea but about integrating a nation’s geographic position with farsighted political and strategic decisions. In this sense, Mahan anticipated fundamental themes of modern geopolitics: the relationship between natural resources, human geography, and strategy.

One classic example cited by Mahan is the Netherlands in the 17th century. Its commercial power did not stem solely from the quality of its fleets but from its unique geographic configuration: calm, navigable rivers that allowed for quick and economical access to internal resources and neighboring markets. This synergy between geography and policy, for Mahan, represented the foundation of every successful naval strategy.

In his reasoning, the sea was simultaneously a tool and an arena of power, the intersection of trade, politics, and strategy. Mahan did not view maritime power as an independent variable but as the result of a complex combination of factors: geography, demography, industrial capacity, and political choices. His vision remains strikingly relevant in a world still heavily reliant on maritime routes for global trade.

THE SIX PILLARS OF MARITIME POWER

Alfred Thayer Mahan did not merely emphasize the importance of the sea; he identified six fundamental factors that determine a nation’s ability to exert maritime power. These factors—geographic position, physical conformation, territorial extent, demographics, the character of the population, and the character of the government—constitute the backbone of his geopolitical thought.

Geographic position was, for Mahan, the first crucial element. A nation with direct access to open seas and located along strategic routes enjoyed a competitive advantage. However, this geographic element had to be complemented by a favorable **physical conformation**: natural harbors, well-distributed coastlines, and internal waterways played a decisive role in facilitating trade and naval projection. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, with their deep ports and navigable internal waterways, serve as perfect examples.

Mahan did not underestimate the importance of **territorial extent**, but he always considered it in relation to population density. A vast, sparsely populated territory without infrastructure risks becoming a liability rather than an asset. This leads to the fourth factor: **demographics**. A large population, particularly one culturally inclined toward trade and navigation, is essential for sustaining a commercial and military navy.

The final two factors are the **character of the population** and the **character of the government**. For Mahan, an enterprising, commerce-oriented, and well-educated population constituted a pillar of maritime power development. Yet, it was the government that, through its policies, transformed these potentials into reality. Mahan considered the ability of institutions to promote and sustain a coherent maritime strategy crucial, warning against leaving vital decisions to chance.

These six factors, organically combined, represented for Mahan the formula for maritime success. Yet, their application was not automatic: everything depended on a nation's political and strategic choices, a theme Mahan explored with even greater depth in his later works.

MAHAN AND CLASSICAL GEOPOLITICS

Although Alfred Thayer Mahan is primarily remembered as the theorist of maritime power, his contribution to geopolitics extends much further. In many aspects, Mahan anticipates the central themes of Western classical geopolitics, later developed by thinkers such as Halford Mackinder, Friedrich Ratzel, and Nicholas Spykman. However, unlike these authors, Mahan never reduced his thinking to a simple form of geographical determinism.

For Mahan, geography was an essential tool for understanding a nation's strategic potential, but it could never be separated from the human element. The scholar John Sumida has emphasized how Mahan attributed significant importance to the decision-making capabilities of political and military leaders, insisting that geography alone does not determine a nation's destiny.

A striking example is his approach to geographical positioning. Mahan did not merely describe the advantages of access to the sea or strategic locations but analyzed how these advantages could be leveraged or ignored depending on political decisions. This distinguished him from Mackinder, who regarded the geographic positioning of Eurasia as an almost inevitable destiny for global domination.

Another point of contact with classical geopolitics is Mahan's analysis of the competition between terrestrial and maritime powers. For Mahan, the sea represented the primary factor for economic and strategic unification. However, he acknowledged that terrestrial powers, such as Tsarist Russia, could challenge maritime dominance by leveraging their vast territories and new transportation technologies, such as railroads. This theme, which Mackinder later expanded upon in his Heartland theory, is central to Mahan's thinking, though articulated in a more pragmatic and less deterministic manner.

Ultimately, Mahan was not merely a theorist of naval strength. His ability to intertwine geography, strategy, and politics makes him a forerunner of systemic geopolitics, capable of interpreting global dynamics in ways that remain extraordinarily relevant today.

NAVAL STRATEGY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION ROUTES

For Alfred Thayer Mahan, the sea was not just a strategic resource but a true global infrastructure. Maritime communication routes represented, for him, the beating heart of world commerce and the primary battleground for powers aspiring to economic and military dominance. Controlling these routes was not merely a logistical advantage but a strategic necessity that could determine the rise or fall of entire nations.

Mahan emphasized how the great powers of the past thrived by dominating the seas. For instance, the British Empire built its economic and political hegemony by controlling key points of global

communication routes: Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, Singapore, and the Cape of Good Hope. These strategic chokepoints ensured not only the protection of supply lines but also the ability to project military power anywhere in the world.

Mahan's thinking rested on a fundamental distinction: not all communication routes are equal. Some routes, for geographic, economic, and political reasons, acquire crucial importance. Among these, canals and straits are the most vulnerable yet strategically significant points. The Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca, for example, were and remain vital for global trade as they connect oceans and continents. For Mahan, controlling these passages was the cornerstone of an effective naval strategy.

A central aspect of Mahan's theory is the concept of **relative position**. The strategic relevance of a location does not depend solely on its absolute geographical position but on the historical and political context in which it is situated. For example, the Gulf of Mexico, which Mahan compared to the Mediterranean for its strategic importance, represented a crucial zone for the United States to consolidate its influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Mahan was aware that technology would transform the nature of competition for control over maritime routes. Steam-powered ships, faster and more reliable than sailing vessels, were reshaping trade routes, while new communication technologies such as the telegraph increased the ability to coordinate operations on a global scale. Nevertheless, no matter how technology evolved, geography remained immutable: seas and oceans continued to serve as the only truly global infrastructure, capable of connecting continents and markets.

Naval strategy, according to Mahan, could not ignore the control of communication routes, which required well-distributed naval bases along the main routes. These bases were not just logistical support points but true force multipliers. A nation with well-positioned bases could project power more rapidly and sustain prolonged campaigns, while a power without adequate bases risked losing control of the seas even with a numerically superior fleet.

For Mahan, the sea was thus both a resource and a challenge. Its vastness offered unlimited opportunities but also required careful planning to exploit them fully. A nation that neglected the control of maritime communication routes, Mahan warned, would inevitably fall behind those who understood their strategic importance.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AXIS

Alfred Thayer Mahan recognized the British Empire as the most successful example of global maritime power. For centuries, Britain had built its hegemony through farsighted naval strategy and an almost uncontested dominance over maritime communication routes. Mahan saw in the United States a potential heir to this tradition, capable of replacing the United Kingdom as the world's leading maritime power.

A central element of Mahan's thought was the concept of the "single ocean." He emphasized how the seas and oceans, despite their apparent divisions, were an interconnected system. This vision reflected the geopolitical reality of an increasingly globalized world, where distances were shrinking

thanks to new transportation and communication technologies. The continuity of the oceans meant that a dominant maritime power could exert influence on a global scale, controlling key points of trade and military strategy.

Mahan was a strong advocate of the Anglo-American alliance. He believed that the strategic interests of the United States and Great Britain were closely aligned, especially in facing the threats posed by terrestrial powers such as Tsarist Russia and, later, Germany. For Mahan, cooperation between the two leading maritime powers of the world was not just desirable but necessary to ensure global stability.

An especially innovative aspect of Mahan's thought was his ability to anticipate future geopolitical challenges. He foresaw that Russia's expansion toward the Pacific and the Persian Gulf would pose an increasing threat to Anglo-American interests. Similarly, Mahan predicted that the rise of emerging powers such as Japan and Germany would alter global power dynamics, requiring a concerted strategic response.

However, Mahan was no idealist. He acknowledged that the Anglo-American alliance would not be based on shared values or cultural affinities but on concrete geopolitical interests. For Mahan, geopolitics was a game of power, where alliances formed and dissolved based on the strategic necessities of the moment.

The relationship with the British Empire was not without tensions. Mahan understood that the United States would need to develop its own geopolitical identity, rather than merely following the British example. He insisted on the importance of building an independent merchant and military navy capable of ensuring national security and projecting power on a global scale.

The idea of a transatlantic alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom, which would later be fully realized in NATO, can be seen as a natural evolution of Mahan's thought. He intuited that joint control of maritime routes by the two leading Anglo-Saxon powers would be fundamental to maintaining global stability and countering the ambitions of terrestrial powers.

In conclusion, Mahan not only celebrated Britain's maritime tradition but urged the United States to surpass it, adapting it to the challenges of a new century. His strategic vision, rooted in the geopolitical reality of his time, anticipated many of the dynamics that would shape the international system of the 20th century, making him one of the most influential thinkers in the history of geopolitics.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: MAHAN AND THE COMPETITION BETWEEN POWERS

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Alfred Thayer Mahan developed his ideas in a world characterized by intense competition among global powers. The United States, still emerging as a global power, sought to consolidate its role, while the British Empire struggled to maintain its supremacy, challenged by rising powers such as Germany, Japan, and Tsarist Russia.

Mahan foresaw that this competition would redefine the global order and that control of the seas would be the decisive factor in the success of any nation. He focused in particular on the importance of the Pacific and Asia, which he considered the new central theater of global geopolitics. In his

work *The Problem of Asia* (1900), Mahan highlighted how Russia, China, and the Ottoman Empire represented potential areas of expansion for both terrestrial and maritime powers, making control of maritime routes even more crucial.

One of the most innovative aspects of Mahan's thought was his ability to integrate geography, history, and strategy. For example, he predicted that the Suez Canal and the future Panama Canal would radically transform global trade routes, intensifying competition for control over these strategic infrastructures. Additionally, he identified the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea as areas of fundamental importance for the security and expansion of the United States, comparing them to the Mediterranean in terms of their strategic significance.

Mahan was also an acute observer of the dynamics between terrestrial and maritime powers. He recognized that Tsarist Russia, with its vast territorial expanse and ambitions toward warm-water ports, posed a significant threat to the global balance of power. At the same time, Mahan emphasized that maritime powers, thanks to their mobility and ability to project power, had an intrinsic advantage in maintaining control over trade routes and colonies.

Mahan's vision was pragmatic and realistic: he did not underestimate the ability of terrestrial powers to adapt to new technologies, such as railroads, which were increasing their capacity for internal mobilization. However, he remained steadfast in his belief that control of the seas would be the decisive factor in global competition.

His thought was deeply rooted in the idea that geopolitics was a continuous competition, where the dominance of a region or a strategic resource was never permanent. This led him to emphasize the necessity of constant strategic adaptation by powers, a principle that profoundly influenced naval and strategic policies in the 20th century.

THE CONCEPT OF TERRESTRIAL AND MARITIME POWER

One of the central aspects of Mahan's thought is the relationship between terrestrial power and maritime power, a dichotomy that later became a key theme in classical geopolitics thanks to scholars like Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman. However, Mahan developed this idea uniquely, emphasizing the integrated roles of geography, strategy, and politics.

For Mahan, maritime power was inherently more flexible and dynamic than terrestrial power. The sea, with its vastness and openness, allowed for unlimited mobility and offered a unique strategic advantage: the ability to rapidly move troops, goods, and resources over great distances. Moreover, control of the seas enabled a nation to exert economic and military pressure on other powers without requiring a direct invasion.

However, Mahan did not underestimate the potential of terrestrial powers. He recognized that states like Tsarist Russia, with their vast territorial expanse and natural resources, had the ability to significantly influence the global balance. The construction of railroads, such as the Trans-Siberian Railway, represented a major advancement for terrestrial powers, enabling them to consolidate internal control and project power toward strategic regions.

In *The Problem of Asia*, Mahan analyzed in detail the role of Russia as the dominant terrestrial power in Eurasia. He emphasized that Russia's geographic position, with its limited access to open seas, pushed the Tsarist Empire to seek strategic outlets toward the Pacific and the Mediterranean. This geographic pressure, combined with political ambition, made Russia a constant threat to maritime powers.

Another central element of Mahan's thought was the concept of interaction between terrestrial and maritime power. He believed that no power could achieve complete dominance without integrating elements of both spheres. For instance, the British Empire, though a maritime power, required strategic land bases to support its naval operations. Similarly, a terrestrial power like Russia needed a naval fleet to protect its interests in open seas.

Mahan also anticipated many of the challenges that would arise in the 20th century, such as competition for natural resources and the control of peripheral areas. He understood that the future of international relations would increasingly be determined by the interaction between the central powers of Eurasia and global maritime powers—a framework that later inspired Spykman's Rimland theory.

Ultimately, Mahan's thinking on the relationship between terrestrial and maritime power was neither static nor rigid. He saw these two dimensions as complementary and constantly evolving, emphasizing that a nation's success depended on its ability to adapt to geopolitical and technological changes. This integrated approach sets him apart as one of the most forward-thinking figures in the history of geopolitics.

CRITIQUES AND REINTERPRETATIONS OF MAHAN'S THOUGHT

Despite the extraordinary influence of his ideas, Alfred Thayer Mahan was not immune to criticism, much of which focused on his alleged geographical determinism and the rigidity of his analyses. However, these judgments often stem from simplified interpretations of his work, ignoring its depth and complexity.

One of the main criticisms levelled at Mahan was his insistence on the primacy of maritime power over terrestrial power. Some observers, such as British historian Paul Kennedy, argued that Mahan overestimated the role of naval power, particularly in light of the technological developments of the 20th century. Kennedy, for example, suggested that Halford Mackinder's prediction—that terrestrial power would prevail due to new transportation technologies—proved more accurate than Mahan's theories.

However, this interpretation misses the core of Mahan's thought, which was never rigidly deterministic. As scholar John Sumida has noted, Mahan always placed significant emphasis on human decision-making, strategy, and politics. Geography, while important, was only one of many variables determining a power's success. In fact, Mahan himself warned against relying solely on geography or technology, stressing the importance of political and military leadership capable of maximizing opportunities within the geopolitical context.

Another recurring criticism concerned his apparent preference for imperialist expansion. Some contemporaries, as well as many later scholars, saw his works as an implicit endorsement of colonization and global domination. However, Mahan was not an unconditional supporter of expansionism. Rather, he believed that expansion was an inevitable consequence of competition among powers, especially in a global context where control of resources and communication routes was vital for national security.

Reinterpretations of Mahan's thought have allowed for a more balanced understanding of his ideas. For example, modern scholars like Colin Gray and Jakub Grygiel have reassessed the importance of his emphasis on controlling maritime routes in the context of contemporary globalization. For these analysts, Mahan's insights into the strategic role of the sea remain relevant even in the era of advanced technologies, as global trade still depends heavily on maritime navigation.

In conclusion, Mahan's thought withstands criticism because it does not adhere to a static worldview. His ability to integrate geography, history, and politics makes him an extraordinarily modern thinker, whose ideas continue to shape geopolitical debate.

THE LEGACY OF ALFRED THAYER MAHAN IN MODERN GEOPOLITICS

Alfred Thayer Mahan's legacy extends well beyond his era, shaping military strategies and geopolitical thought into the 20th and 21st centuries. His insights into the centrality of the sea as the lifeblood of global power remain deeply influential, inspiring analyses and policies worldwide. Mahan is thus a central figure in the study of geopolitics and strategic theory.

One of the most enduring aspects of Mahan's thought is his emphasis on the interdependence of maritime power, trade, and national security. This vision profoundly influenced the naval policies of many nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and China. The United States, in particular, took Mahan's ideas to heart, using them to build a formidable navy that became a cornerstone of its global power projection.

Mahan was not merely a naval theorist but also a forerunner of globalization. He understood that seas were not simply natural boundaries but dynamic arteries connecting economies, societies, and cultures. This systemic vision of the world placed maritime route control at the core of a nation's military security and economic prosperity.

A clear example of Mahan's enduring relevance is China's increasing focus on controlling the South China Sea and the trade routes passing through the Strait of Malacca. With artificial islands, a growing naval presence, and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, China reflects many of Mahan's principles. Similarly, the United States continues to prioritize its global naval presence, recognizing maritime dominance as a key element of its hegemony.

Mahan's influence also extends to academic fields. Many geopolitical theorists, from Nicholas Spykman to Zbigniew Brzezinski, have acknowledged their intellectual debt to Mahan's work. Spykman's Rimland theory, for instance, builds on Mahan's idea that control over coastal regions is essential for maintaining dominance over terrestrial powers.

Another vital aspect of Mahan's legacy is his interdisciplinary approach. By combining geography, history, strategy, and politics, Mahan crafted a unique framework for analyzing global power dynamics. His work serves as both a guide for policymakers and an inspiration for scholars seeking to understand the complexities of international relations.

In conclusion, Alfred Thayer Mahan was far more than a naval strategist; he was a pioneer of modern geopolitics. His ideas, rooted in the realities of his time, continue to resonate in a world where maritime routes remain essential for global trade and power. His legacy endures not only in the fleets built according to his theories but also in his ability to foresee and articulate the fundamental dynamics of international power.

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