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Maritime Strategic Cultures of the US and China: A Historical Perspective

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Since the early 2010s, the US and China have crucially projected their seapower and naval supremacy for gaining leverage in international relations. Although leverages in the maritime domain are crucial strategic goals of both, naval and maritime activities of each have been pursued under different maritime strategic cultures or patterns of naval and maritime activities regarding their unique national experiences, interests, and geographical factors.

As a result, this commentary will examine the maritime strategic culture of those including the rationales behind them through a historical perspective. It will begin with exploring the maritime strategic culture of an existing great power like the US. After that, the maritime strategic culture of China as an emerging great power will be examined.

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To begin with the US maritime strategic culture, the US currently processes six fleets able to mobilise for involvement in many conflicts across the globe such as War against ISIS and the ongoing Israel and Hamas Conflicts including promoting Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) militarily and diplomatically. In this respect, it can be implied that the US has attempted to globally project its seapower and naval supremacy to secure its overseas commercial interests and American homeland from any threats before those reach it.

In protecting overseas commercial interests, the patterns of the US naval and maritime activities have seemed to be driven by historical trauma during the early days of independence. During that time, American commercial vessels were exploited and threatened by the adversary states and pirates, especially from the joint exploitation and threats from the sultan of Morocco and Algiers pirates in 1785.

Moreover, the US also learnt from this case that crucially relying on other states' naval patrols was unsustainable for protecting America's commercial vessels overseas. This was because, in 1793, the Portuguese navy retreated from patrolling the Strait of Gibraltar as it signed a treaty with Algiers. Respectively, the exploitation and threats from Algiers pirates were intensified.

In this respect, Congress responded by debating about the American necessity to have a robust navy to protect American commercial interests aboard by themselves. This led to the launch of the Act to Provide a Naval Armament in 1794.

Apart from the historical trauma, intellectual influence from Alfred Taylor Mahan has also importantly shaped the US maritime strategic culture. In 1890, Mahan suggested in the book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* that the sea is a 'great highway' for prosperity, and there is no guarantee that the commercial ships will be safe along the route in the 'lawless seas'.

Therefore, projecting naval supremacy through fleet mobilisation and strategic port occupation is necessary for peacetime, while this is also important for denying the enemies from seeking prosperity and strategic advantages from the sea during wartime. This idea has crucially influenced the current US naval strategy as the book remains a key literature for studying navy and seapower. In these regards, projecting seapower and naval supremacy on a global scale has significantly protected the US overseas commercial interests.

Moreover, the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 by Imperial Japan and the 9/11 Incident in 2001 perpetrated by Al-Qaeda have proved that, sometimes, geographical advantages cannot protect the homeland itself. This is because the American homeland – which had been protected by the geographical distance of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans' vast area – could be under attack by adversarial entities from the other sides of the oceans. To secure its homeland from being attacked by enemies halfway across the world, and due to the indispensable global reach capabilities of navies, pre-emptively projecting seapower and naval supremacy worldwide has been used as the US strategic tool.

Regarding these, possessing a large navy that can globally operate to secure American overseas commercial interests and America's homeland from any threats becomes the US maritime strategic culture.

In the case of China, since the early 2010s, it has obviously projected seapower and naval supremacy in strategic islands nearing its maritime domains, including the relevant maritime trade routes through naval drills, fleet mobilisation, naval force multiplier, and promoting the Maritime Silk Road across the Indo-Pacific region. These have been driven by the three following factors.

Firstly, this commentary would argue that geographical disadvantages made seapower and naval supremacy projection a novel strategic option for China. This was because those

disadvantages did not allow the Chinese to develop and exert seapower and naval supremacy throughout their long history. Bruce A. Elleman suggested in the book *A History of the Modern Chinese Navy, 1840-2020*, that mountainous geography along the China coast including annual flooding and the abundance of silt obstructed the Chinese before modernisation from using seas and oceans.

Additionally, historical traumas have also shaped China's maritime strategic culture. Unsuccessful naval warfare to conquer Annam (Ancient Vietnamese Kingdom) in 938 and failure to invade Japan twice in 1278 and 1281 have seemed to influence China to avoid pre-emptive naval warfare at the adversaries' maritime domains since then, as they were mostly defeated in wars at sea there. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, China's coastal defence was insufficient to resist the invasion of the great powers. As a result, coastal defence by denying the hostile to land their force ashore became China's strategic goal.

Since Taiwan had been also used as a strategic island against mainland China politically by Ming royalists (1640s-1683) and Imperial Japan (1895-1945), controlling strategic islands in the maritime domain near China territory has been crucial and sensitive for China. Thus, China has attempted to exert seapower and naval supremacy to deny the adversaries control and utilise those islands.

Besides geographical disadvantages and historical traumas, economic incentives also influence China's maritime strategic culture. It can be argued that, in Ancient China, the Chinese economy did not rely on maritime logistics as its salt and rice economies, some of the most important domestic economies, purely relied on transportation through domestic rivers and canals. This influenced Ancient China to focus on developing a navy that was efficiently operated in the rivers and canals instead of one specialised in projecting power at seas.

Nevertheless, nowadays, China's economy is heavily sustained by maritime logistics. Jean-Paul Rodrigue and Theo Notteboom illustrated in the book *Port Economics, Management and Policy*, published in 2022, that more than half of China's international trade value and 80% of China's energy supply have to transit through the Strait of Malacca which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Therefore, projecting seapower and naval supremacy throughout the relevant trade route for economic security becomes an important strategic option for China.

In these regards, it can be interpreted that processing a navy – that can robustly defend China's long coast and concurrently keep the maritime domain near China's territory and strategic islands free from adversaries including securing the relevant maritime trade routes – has been China's maritime strategic culture.

To conclude, this commentary has already explored the maritime strategic cultures of the US and China through a historical perspective. It is discovered that even though historical traumas, geographical factors, and interests have crucially shaped the US and China maritime strategic cultures, the maritime strategic cultures of both are different. The US prioritises projecting seapower and naval supremacy worldwide whereas China focuses on exerting those to the near maritime domain, imminent strategic islands, and the relevant maritime trade routes.