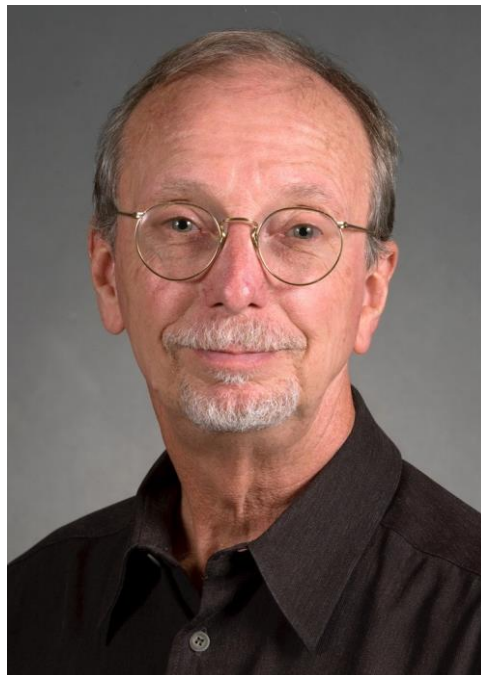


ISSN 2704-6419

# American Sea Power

## The Inescapable but Imperative Global Stabilizer

Prof. Phil Kelly



International Institute for Global Analyses

Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses  
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)  
Analytical Dossier – N. 9/2019 – March 2019

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First Edition: March 2019

Analytical Dossier – N. 9/2019

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## Abstract

*Today and likely for decades ahead, the United States ranks as the clearly-dominant global sea power. Its six powerful blue-water carrier battle fleets extend distant from home ports to safeguard maritime passages and to balance Eurasian land forces for American security. But, the immediate maritime challenge from China may disturb this US purpose and hegemony.*

*Accordingly, this essay's objective rests with answers to three questions relative to the above contentions:*

- *What American traits have prompted this dominant marine authority?*
- *Why the need for its navy to become so involved over vast oceans and in faraway lands?*
- *How is America responding to the present Chinese challenge?*

*Features internal to and beyond North America have underlain a rise to global dominance of US sea power. This strong maritime authority in turn has drawn the Navy's presence over the oceans and within the margins of Eurasia to protect against threats that might confront America, presently, these primarily from China.*

*Key words: sea power and land power, American heartland, US strategic push/pull factors, offshore balancing/forward presence, Eurasian balancing*

## Introduction:

Pertinent to the queries asked above, i.e., what has created a dominant American sea power, and why the apparent necessity for its oceanic and Eurasian involvement, the author will respond with explanation in three parts: first, in Part One, he will submit possible reasons for the first two questions posed, once again – why a superior sea-fare calling for the United States, and why a need for an American security in distant oceans and lands? Second, in Part Two, this narrative will expand with a review of the contemporary missions, resources, and positioning of the US Navy, all reflective again of this American maritime destiny that must thrust its marine beyond its shores and onto another continent. And for a third part, in a postscript the author will describe the evolving responses to the alleged Chinese intrusions against free passage over the Asian waters. Accordingly, the three parts of this article join in sequence by examining different but related themes of this global maritime involvement of the US Navy.

As the author will suggest for the first answer, special geopolitical factors within North America and elsewhere have favored a United States sea-power dominance. For the second -- why a US Eurasian involvement for security? -- three factors may explain: (1) As a commercial trading state, America must rely on open sea lanes that translate to vital national interests. (2) Eurasia's two Great Powers, China and Russia, pose potential dangers that must be confronted by American forces. (3) And to satisfy these factors, the United States, by way of its strong navy, possesses the power and the determination to maintain a hemispheric protection and a global stability. And for the third, China's recent rise as likely threat has caused several maritime adjustments during this period of Great Power transition.

Countries identify as sea powers or as land powers (a few arrive as "hybrids" or both), their status dependent upon their locations, whether surrounded by waters or contained within continents. Accordingly, their foreign involvements and security objectives will reflect such territorial placements. Land powers exhibit armies within a continental orientation, a marine contingent would not correlate heavily to their concern. Of course, sea powers display a need for navies, those holding a more extensive global perspective of both oceanic and territorial involvement, the sea most evident, the land secondary but still important. Reflective of its unique heritage, the United States as a hybrid depends upon both its navy and army to defend its interests abroad, its sea and land powers exerting a forward presence specifically placed for maintaining influence in foreign places. But, this essay will stay more focused on the United States as a natural sea power with a mission to control the oceans and to offshore balance both its marine and army against Eurasian and other challenges.

To extend this narrative further, in the present era, North America's special location on Earth surely condemns its occupier, the United States with its navy, to extending its present authority onto the world's oceans assertively and dominantly and toward Eurasia's shores for projecting force there. This sea-power calling, seemingly environmentally-deterministic, sets not only for enhancing the country's own protection and prosperity but also for bringing a broader international stability as well that rebounds in turn back for a stronger American safety. To this ambitious summons and burden for extending power onto and beyond oceans, and despite budgetary and other restraints to the Navy, the country has no other choice than to be so strongly involved globally for reason of its unique and inherent geographic setting!

A note on the author's procedure. This account is designed as an essay, more his opinion than expansive academic research and literature review. The reader will see few footnotes to points of sea- power traits beyond those of the author's choice. Topics

outlined in Parts Two and Three about the US Navy correspond also to selections the author has judged to be relevant to his discussion.

Too, this essay will refer primarily to present times, from the rise to global hegemony of the United States during World War Two and continuing on to the contemporary epoch and perhaps onwards for the next several decades.

Finally, the methodology enlisted follows classical geopolitics, the importance of country, region, and resource placements as impacting on a state's foreign policy and action. Theories from this model (Kelly 2016, 173-186), in particular for Part One, will be utilized to portray rationale for the rise of American sea power and for its extension over Eurasian waters and lands. To a lesser extent but still important, the model of realism (Kelly 2019), too, affixes to features in Parts One and Two.

Part One: The American environment predestines a sea-power orientation and a US defense based upon an encircling of Eurasia:

The various attributes that follow will demonstrate a unique American maritime exceptionalism, reflective of its singular geopolitical placement that has lent to it a necessary naval-power activism and dominance and to an eventual global leadership as stabilizer and protector. The United States, for its prosperity and security, owns no other choice!

This essay's first part divides into three sectors, the first, to exhibit factors creating a seafaring vocation for the United States, the second, to explore why a favorable Eurasian balance is so important to American security, and the third, to offer a push-and-pull premise resting upon a North American heartland motif that ties the United States to a Eurasian intrusion.

Sector One: Factors prompting an American seafaring destiny:

The several facets below have lent to an American maritime inclination: Insular position. Encircled by vast oceans and seas, distant from Eurasian dangers, and confined to a safe and richly-endowed Western Hemisphere, this privileged continental expanse awards North America a productive sweep of lands and waters, protection from immediate invasion, maneuverability over great outer spaces, and sufficient power to manage forces abroad that may threaten its sovereignty. This span of environmental bounty, safety, and international involvement accords to an American insular expression, an "island" fate prompting an outward reach over the global commons (international ocean waters).

Distance and thus Isolation from Europe enabled the early United States to enjoy a largely unopposed occupation of most of North America. Ohio Valley shatterbelts, of Native American tribes and their European allies checkmating the Yankee expansion westward, soon were replaced by a US monopoly of force that would extend over the entire region, once Napoleon Bonaparte's revolutionary invasions upset his continent's power balances and forced the colonial masters in America back to their homelands. That happening, the United States then consolidated its North American authority onwards to the Pacific Ocean through conquest, purchase, and occupation, and at the conclusion, possession of a very profitable endowment.

The wide expanse of the great Pacific, likewise, links into this westward equation as well. Its breadth prevented extensive Asian colonization in America that might have impeded rival settlements along the nation's western shores, and in turn, this prohibited the Americans from spreading too thinly their empire further to the west beyond Hawaii. Nonetheless, the present environment has now encouraged the US to seek a greater maritime presence in the Asian sector, China and India creating a shift in the global balance, and to that, to a new American interest and ability to join in a rising Pacific Era to which the US, likewise, has become a natural resident and player.

Yet, a caveat here: spatial distance continues to favor the Americans toward securing their continent against a foreign attack from over the sea waters. The new technologies of travel, ship building, and communication appear to have diminished space such that the American, more than her Eurasian opponents, can cross the oceans with lower costs to enhance US involvements astride Eurasia and the Southern World. Asian nations cannot duplicate this advantage in their diminished seaward technologies and fleets. The traditional "loss of strength gradient" thesis in this instance may be

inappropriate to the present moment, distances not impeding the Americans from delivering an easier transit to and basing in remote lands.

Two ocean fronts in addition to the Caribbean Sea and the Great Lakes helped create a trading profession. Deep and protected ports plus passable rivers and lakes elevated a seafaring occupation. And once consolidated as a continental nation, the United States possessed the greatest length of accessible coastlines of any other people, promoting further this inclination toward commerce. No other countries, including Canada and Russia, could admit to ocean fronts so available to settlement and development at either end of their continental sovereignties. One should not miss the importance of the Mississippi River and its tributaries and the Great Lakes, watersheds uniting the middle portions of the nation and providing riverine, coastal, and lake transport for industrial and agricultural products whose impact would extend worldwide.

North America possesses significant wealth for pursuing such a global reach. Its fertile and well-watered soils and temperate climates span the greatest stretch of contiguous farmland on the planet, this delivering a vast surplus of food exports elsewhere. Its abundant mineral deposits reside close to energy sources, producing a powerful industry and technology that has attracted immigrants to help found a democratic and capitalist underpinning. Internal and coastal water passages available to less-costly barge shipping extend in mileage to equal an aggregate of all riverine ways worldwide – these and other factors all combined to an unparalleled prosperity and strength well-above other nations of Earth.

Likewise, that combination of environmental traits awards a sea-power opportunity that the United States has now decided to pursue. At the present moment, this wealth spawns a defense budget of roughly \$650 billions, complemented by another \$300 billions of its Eurasian allies. For more specific statistics on this absolute advantage in force, this quotation should be enlightening (Robert Gates footnote 12 in Ziaodong and Qinghai 2017):

The US Navy can carry twice as many aircraft at sea as all the rest of the world combined, and it has more nuclear-powered attack submarines than the rest of the world combined. Its major battle ships carry roughly 8,000 vertical launchers, and it arguably outmatches the next 20 largest navies combined in terms of total missile firepower. The displacement of the US battle fleet exceeds the next 13 navies combined.

Further, add eleven nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and ten large-deck amphibious ships to the above, neither of which can be matched by other nations.

Such qualities of abundance attracted hordes of immigrants and boundless investments from abroad. These immigrant peoples and finance imports occasioned an energetic workforce, an eventual middle class, an effective governance, and a powerful industry and technology that both provided a strong consumer market, instilled a vibrant democratic platform, and encouraged a trading ability and culture. In all, North America continues this patrimony of attracting to it the riches of other places. And from these sources, profitable businesses promoted a commerce with a marine to serve that capitalist function.

Little danger from southern neighbors. Central American weaknesses in the past might have attracted Eurasian partners to rival the North Americans, a Caribbean shatterbelt in violation to Monroe's Doctrine. But such a limited vulnerability now appears restricted by US naval preponderance over the area. To a great extent, the Northern Republic is secure from a landward invasion. South America, not so strategic nor so involved in Great Power

balances over Eurasia, emits predominately a geopolitics internal to its continent (Kelly 1997), and none of its remote states can challenge the North's power.

As an extended continent in shape, breadth, and wealth, North America represents a hybrid quality, one of both sea and land. Ranking third in territory and in population, the United States can field substantial armies that would extend well-beyond the strength of expeditionary forces expected of sea powers in the traditional literature (Gray 1986, 34). Accordingly, this duality of strong navy and army allows the US to locate authority at distant shores and further inland in its leveraging among the Eurasian nations. Russia and China, purely land powers, suffer encirclement from suspicious neighbors, necessitating significant numbers of troops for border security, and both fear restive citizenries that might require suppression by national police, factors also depleting their militaries. The Americans suffer no such distractions over frontiers and peoples and can focus upon deterrence with strength abroad.

Although sea power rates this essay's prime focus, land power should not be kept apart from the marine, for the two, oceanic and continental, intermingle and re-enforce. This facet accords particularly to the Americans, their ability to safeguard ocean passages and to moderate Eurasian forces comes directly from their hybrid commands, both strong navy and army causing this unique purpose.

Colin Gray (1994, ix-xii) states this linkage cogently:

In major conflicts between maritime and continental powers or coalitions, each side must pursue a mixed strategy embracing both land and sea component. . . . Continental powers can win wars against sea powers if they are able to deny tolerable levels of sea control to their maritime-dependent enemies. . . . [Nonetheless] superior sea power has enabled its owners to knit together coalitions [with landward forces] with a total strategic weight greatly superior to those secured by dominant continental strength.

Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, noted for his focus on the marine underlying American greatness, also admits to a land and sea power combining in his *The Problem of Asia and its Effect upon International Policies* (1900, 21-27, 62-63):

The struggle as arrayed will be between land power and sea power. . . Each side will need and will avail itself, in degree, of the services of the other element; that is, the land power will try to reach the sea and to utilize it for its own ends, while the sea power must obtain support on land, through the motives it can bring to bear upon the inhabitants.

These reflections affix to American sea power and to its land-power alternative, together, a hybrid quality where both US forces, land and sea, combine to balance Eurasia and to patrol maritime straits. Indeed, the United States joining its sea and land powers with rimland allies against threats and challengers has brought its current global hegemony.

North America defines as a true continent. And from this distinction, the author has alleged to it in the Mississippi River basin an American heartland configuration (Kelly 2017), perhaps a more suitable geopolitical fit than is Halford Mackinder's original Eurasian pivot (see below for expansion of this thought). If this assertion be accepted, a feasible landward orientation with also a marine facility for the United States would be logical, once more showing a hybrid quality to the US that brings greater strength to the Americans. Its armies can reach inland for Eurasian alliances to impact upon the continental center. Indeed, the United States is different – it is not Eurasian. And thus, its foreign residence enables the more distant, and thus the more trustable, Americans an easier access to basing among the rimland countries that would not reflect a similar trust toward their immediate neighbors (Levy and Thompson 2010).

America situates far away from Eurasian threats, yet it still is able to intrude into Asia and Europe by way of its offshore-balancing facility. Such separation allows the US to encircle Eurasia and still to avoid being encircled by opponents from that continent who



might endanger. No other Great Powers can claim this American immunity against being surrounded in its lands and oceans. And to repeat, just China and Russia hold any possibility of endangering North America, but such harm is diminished by American dominance over the lengthy ocean lanes and by the weaknesses of these challengers' navies.

Offshore balancing, or "forward presence," a term coined by US mariners (O'Rourke 2012, 48), demonstrates an American naval support for Eurasian and other allies who may face risks to their sovereignties. This forward capacity allows or prevents sea-embargoes and port-blockades, protects straits and maritime passageways from pirates, terrorists, and rival states, punishes aggressions by land and sea powers, and enables safe marine traffic, now accounting for much of trade worldwide. Above all, such deployment reduces dangers in Eurasia and in the Southern World that could menace North America and elsewhere.

Forward presence affixes to American sea power. The country will deploy seaward force, when necessary, to foreign places of security concern. Yet, it can avoid involvements within those balancing stations as well. Statespersons of North America alone among all nations possess this flexibility of guiding their fleets and armies overseas to establish stability for some and security for themselves.

The leadership appears to have understood the nation's "space mastery," an awareness of taking advantage of this American exceptionalism. The governing elite seems to have accepted the notion that America's security rests upon its navy, one strong enough with its army to safeguard this hemisphere and to balance forces in Eurasia to its favor, and correspondingly, to enhance a global stability that would also rebound to its own commerce and safety.

Why, then, this US commitment to a dominant navy and army that is driven to the oceans and to an overseas involvement? Three suggestions may satisfy for bringing likely conclusions: (1) The United States relies on its trading and commercial vocation, necessitating safe ocean passages and ports. (2) Forces within Eurasia pose the greatest threats to American security requiring a ready Yankee intrusion. (3) And the US possesses the location, wealth, power, and determination to spread its military and commerce over the globe against potential dangers that could menace American independence. Whether rational or not, that vista is shared by the American political and military elite.

Admiral Donald Kirkland, former director of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, offers another voice that speaks in a similar tone (Kirkland, Altman, and Solomon, 2017):

And so we cannot walk away, at least not without incurring grave risks to our economic strength and the defense of our homeland. Since the earliest days of our republic, our commerce has required us to maintain persistent military presences overseas. . . . Neither [our wealth nor our safety] is possible absent a U.S. Navy that possesses sufficient strength relative to competitors to deter – and it necessary fight and win – wars.

But, American isolation holds limitations in addition to the above advantages: an insular or limited mindset of its people and leaders, at times, ignorant of and hostile to outside stimulants including the contributions of immigrants; a bent toward accumulating capitalist wealth, blinding citizens against a needed balance between competition and altruism; a reluctance to align with allied nations and international bodies, holding back opportunities that could yield benefit; and a weakening polity experiencing instabilities due to an ill-regulated capitalism. American exceptionalism envisions a negative as well as a positive: the former in arrogance, ignorance, isolation, polarization, and over-extension, the latter in community, careful thought, responsibility to others, and respected

leadership to direct forces and solutions abroad. One factor competes against the other, but yet both reign and hold impact.

### Sector Two: The necessity for an American balancing of Eurasian forces:

The United States, by way of its location a seafaring nation, is well-situated to dominate the global commons and to balance Eurasian powers by utilizing its strong navy. The alternative, a “fortress America” defense, of alone safeguarding the Hemisphere, many believe simply is not rational or possible. Rather, American security must depend upon its strength to intervene across the seas to assure secure oceans and a friendly Eurasia, with the US as balancer to satisfy its own safety. This advantage, burden, and destiny closely affixes to the American position relative to the spatial arrangements of oceans and continents upon our Earth.

This global configuration of seas and lands beyond America has allowed for yet additional reasons for the country extending its sea power toward Eurasia for protecting its own commerce and shores by such interventions:

The Eurasian continent holds the world’s greatest concentration of peoples and resources. If it were united and synchronized, we might see it globally dominant and sometimes dangerous to America. As such, the Western Hemisphere could be largely defenseless and subservient to overseas masters. Fortunately, Eurasia suffers an innate disunity, a checkerboard of regions and states kept divided by an assortment of peoples traditionally at conflict among each other. Accordingly, America may clasp the opportunity for balancing, and further for inflating, the continent’s fragmentation for its own protection, and its navy offers a unique tool for promoting this resolution.

American security rests upon a divided Eurasia and a settled Southern World. It cannot be secure by itself against a united and hostile continent or be safely arraigned against stricken and increasingly-radical marginal peoples. Nor can it intervene by itself to construct a better world in both the developed core and the depressed periphery, laudable as that may seem, the US lacking resources to create a world that could be stable enough to eliminate strife and poverty that might pose dangers to American and others’ independence.

The American search for security also accords to the commercial sectors, kept stable by maintaining open seas for trade and communications. Seventy percent of commerce transits the seas; yet, storms, piracy, and national rivalries threaten maritime passages. Equal to continental balances, US interests pertain to trade in business and industry for American wealth and autonomy, and again, the country’s marine directs to securing this traffic.

America’s sole strategic threat could materialize in a strong and hostile China, especially in a sea-power challenge to the US marine. China’s official military budget “expanded on average by about 10 percent in real terms from 2006 through 2015. Over the same period, US defense spending averaged a negative real growth of about 0.1 percent.” (Gallagher 2018, 118-119). Growth in its navy has recently shifted from “near sea” defense to “far seas” power projection. Other data of this growing threat could be appended.

Happy for the Americans, China faces internal and foreign troubles: a less-developed and divided people; an autocratic, corrupt, and inefficient government; a treasury not able to challenge North America; an encirclement of opponents in Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, and Russia in addition to the United States; and a vast Pacific Ocean that protects North America from Asian intrusions. China is a land power, having borders to protect and restive peoples in its hinterlands to moderate. Its navy, although

growing, is far from a match to the American. Achieving parity would be long-coming, and more probably would never grow to an effective rivalry.

Russia, far less wealthy than China, faces similar vulnerabilities and poses little danger to America except in cyber-attacks on its democracy and unity. Japan and Germany continue enfolded within a US security grid; India, Brazil, and others lack the power for contention against the United States.

Marginal peoples who inhabit Earth's extremes live in poverty, division, neglect, and dysfunctional governance. They could endanger by asymmetric perils, i.e., terrorism, crime, disease, nuclear proliferation, and forced immigration, for instance, but less directly in strategic threat. The United States cannot settle their plight, but it must protect against their infection. Once more, the navy is amply designed to establish just this sanctuary.

In toto, the United States and its navy appear set on dominating the global commons and on maintaining a Eurasian balance, reflective of an instable international environment, at least, during the present historic epoch.

### Section Three: the North American heartland:

As yet another backdrop toward exploring the contemporary quartering of the US marine, we should give a geopolitical glance to North America as a globally-dominant continental heartland, a pivot more suited to the United States than to Halford Mackinder's original Eurasian placement. The following provides additional reasons for this essay's assertion that geography advantaged an American naval hegemony.

Mackinder's Eurasian heartland (1919; 1904) pertained to a strategic pivot residing within a central continental and land-power placement. His designated features included four interconnected parts: (1) An isolated and protected interior region, distance from oceans (2) that would spawn new technologies, particularly railroads, to strengthen and unify the region. (3) Ample resources also would bring power that would prompt a (4) likely territorial expansion onto and domination over coastal areas which, at some point, would ordain a new world empire to be then "in sight." Mackinder's vision lay with Germany or Russia as occupier of that heartland.

In a general sense, this essay's author will hold to Mackinder's first description, for he accepts the basic framework. But he suggests certain updates to the original (Kelly 2017) that will show North America possessing a better cover to this label over that of the Eurasian. His revisions follow:

1. Central position, such as Mackinder portrays, does not automatically provide protection to and leverage from that core. Encirclement of the pivot could endanger the occupier as well, dependent upon the core's location betwixt neighboring states. In the Eurasian case, Russia has experienced suspicious and strong opponents, a cause for failing to extend herself to distant ocean shores. But the same handicap has not hampered the North Americans, their expansion not burdened by surrounding confinements, and they spread out in territory rather quickly and easily beyond their continental bastion.
2. The "empire" label needs replacing with a "hegemonic" or leader-state designation. The former directs to territorial aggrandizement, not so immediate to the present because the primary state now gains protection through industrial and technological prowess. Conquering lands, a trait of the imperial, no longer translate to national strength and might bring expense and vulnerability in contrast to profit and power. A hegemonic leadership better describes the United States in world affairs.
3. Rimlands or coastal areas should be calculated into the revised nexus to include a sea power beyond the original continental. Nicholas Spykman (1942) correctly elevates coastal margins as equals to heartlands, for the Eurasian rimlands have hosted more strife than has the Russian pivot. These lands, likewise, have offered bases for the Americans to encircle the continent.

North America better fulfills Mackinder's stipulations. (1) Its central position rests devoid of challengers, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, and Argentina more allies to the Yankee than serious opponents. (2) American territorial expansion halted well-before its global hegemony became recognized, an international leadership, instead, soon evolving from technology, trade, and reputation, and all bolstered by a maritime personality. (3) The United States now dominates the Eurasian margins for its own security and for international stability. And at clear variance to Russia, North America is better leveraged for manipulating the Eurasian balances and for blocking states from constructing footholds in the Americas.

The following features that stem from this heartland location should push our report on navies to a higher level of evidence:

Heartlands allege a territorial expansion outwardly from a center. This assumption is based upon a continental position of unity, wealth, and security needs. The Eurasian example has failed in this extension due to absence of resources and to encirclement by suspicious neighbors. But again, the United States has not suffered restraints to its growth and to its interventions overseas. And that expansion has derived from all parts of a unified United States, interior and coastal, the central pivot an engine for a national emergence into an international presence.

The point here fixes on the heartland stimulating an inherent extension to the oceans. The ancient Greeks and Romans, the colonial English, the Russian tsars and Soviets, now the Americans and others – all attempted, and many achieved, a spread from centers to margins for security and power. Like other countries of immediate and past history, the United States, from its Mississippi watershed to the Eurasian margins, has indeed thrust outwardly to lead the world, an impact set from its heartland of a continental core spreading its influence to distant lands and oceans.

Oceans posed as essential mediums for an American enlargement beyond its home-continent. The Eurasians could not spread beyond sea fronts for achieving a wider impact, but the North Americans proved ready to bond to their surrounding oceans and to become involved on foreign shores.

In sum, in this essay's First Part are two contrasting but inter-connected geopolitical phenomena, both performing in unison on the global stage: (1) the North American heartland extending influence outwardly to envelope global oceans and Eurasian rimlands and (2) the US drawn overseas as intervener-from-afar to balance forces of Eurasia for its protection. These two magnates dance to different tunes, yet they are inherently configured in sync to promote a US global hegemony, the first, from a push factor enticing North America to engage beyond its own continental lever, and the second, a pull factor of America reaching toward oceans and Eurasia to satisfy its own security. The one re-enforces the other and both echo themes of this essay: the United States claiming a maritime power from its North American heartland, and this dictating for it an imperative global involvement to moderate restive continents and peoples for its own safety.

#### Part Two: The global positioning of US naval fleets and their missions:

The objective for this second part will be to show a symmetry between the author's premises and the contemporary billeting and objectives of the United States Navy. This author alleges the two do merge, lending validity to the descriptions of the first part by way of the second.

Common expressions that parallel. The maritime literature points to a “combat-credible naval forward presence” onto shores and choke-points adjacent Asia and Europe (Mahnken 2017, 1; O’Rourke 2012, 48; Tangredi 2000, 1). Similar to “offshore balancing,” the Navy’s “forward presence” covers a total oceanic realm and is not limited just to the Eurasian rimlands.

An equivalence in a wider strategic vision also connects as seen in five quotations below, the first four by sailors, the final by an ambassador and academic:

[O]ur security in the modern era depends upon ensuring that no hostile powers come to dominate or seize the material, industrial, and financial resources of Europe and Eastern Asia or the petroleum resources of Southwest Asia. If our adversaries were to combine these resources with their own and then wield them against the United States, American strength and security would be in grave jeopardy. . . . The realities of geography combined with our consistent interests over the past centuries compel us to play ‘away games’ (Kirkland, Altman, and Solomon 2017, pages not marked).

Most of the world’s people, resources, and economic activity are not in the Western Hemisphere, but in the other hemisphere, particularly Eurasia. Consequently, a key element of U.S. national strategy, going back many decades, has been to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon in one part of Eurasia or another, because such a hegemon could deny the United States access to some of the Eastern Hemisphere’s resources and economic activity. Preventing this is a major reason by the U.S. military is structured with force elements . . . that enable it to cross broad expanses of ocean and air space and then conduct sustained, large-scale military operations upon arrival (O’Rourke 2012, 46).

From the start of the Cold War until today, the United States has pursued a consistent maritime strategy: ring Eurasia with sea power (Rubel 2015, 24).

The issue of whether the long-standing U.S. interest in preventing the rise of a hegemonic power along the Eurasian periphery [is one that] remains valid. The conclusion here is that it does, although with Asia displacing Europe as the principal focus of U.S. defense strategy (Krepinevich 2017, 3).

It is essential to us, as it was to Britain, that no single Continental land power should come to dominate the entire Eurasian landmass. Our interest has lain rather in the maintenance of some sort of stable balance among the powers of the interior, in order that none of them should effect the subjugation of others, conquer the seafaring fringes of the landmass, become a great sea power as well as land power, shatter the position of England, and enter – as in these circumstances it certainly would – on an overseas expansion hostile to ourselves and supported by the immense resources of the interior of Europe and Asia (Kennan 1951, 10).

Such depictions contrast in a professional context, the academic more to the abstract and theoretical, the marine more to equipment, personnel, command configurations, budget deficiencies, and so forth. But, this said, the sailor and the scholar do indeed mesh in their strategic descriptions.

One might see additional uniformities in these two official statements of naval purpose:

The mission of the Navy is to maintain, train, and equip combat-ready naval forces capable of winning wars, deterring aggression, and maintaining freedom of the seas (U.S. Navy Official Site).

To recruit, train, equip, and organize to deliver combat ready naval forces to win conflicts and wars while maintaining security and deterrence through sustained forward presence (America’s Navy: Forged by the Sea).

Once more, we see references to “forward presence” and “freedom of the seas,” both of which pertain to the United States militaries intruding onto oceans and Eurasian balances.

Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson, in a keynote address before the 28<sup>th</sup> Surface Warfare Strategy Symposium (2016), spoke in like terminology with such references as unchangeable geography, great-power competitors, choke-points and key areas of vital interests in need of protecting, and strategic offshore balancing with allies. He asserted the Navy's missions have remained the same despite new global challenges and "pressurized budgets."

Where the fleets locate. The positioning of the American navy around the world demonstrates intentions of protecting sea passages and of leveraging Grand Continent balances to the US security favor. The Sixth (west Mediterranean) and the Seventh (west Asia) fleets have operated without pause since World War Two, whereas the Third (east Pacific) and the Fifth (east Mediterranean) plus the Second (US east coast and North Atlantic) and the Fourth (Caribbean/Latin America) have seen intervals of deactivation since 1945, dependent upon political and military leaders' views of dangers and budgets. What follows are brief descriptions of the several US carrier strike fleets, their global locations and missions.

The Seventh fleet holds the greatest strength of the forward-deployed armadas, featuring 70 ships, 300 aircraft, and 40,000 personnel. It participated in the Korean, Vietnamese, and Gulf wars in addition to protecting the Taiwan Straits when this area felt threat. Its commission accords to safeguarding maritime passages for much of the world's ocean-going commerce. The fleet steams near the perils of the North Koreans and the Chinese. This force defends the South Korean peninsula and Japan, patrols the disputed South China Sea, secures Taiwan, Vietnam, and other nearby countries, and safeguards traffic through the Malaccan and other Asian straits. The Indian Ocean has drawn some entry from the Seventh, although this region may merit a separate fleet reflective of the importance of Iran, India, and Pakistan.

The Third fleet sails the eastern and northern Pacific, an expanse of fifty-million square miles that reaches into the Arctic. Reactivated in 1973 after being disbanded in 1945, its present strength includes four aircraft carrier strike forces in addition to the usual complement of support craft. Of late, this assemblage has pushed beyond the International Date Line into areas earlier patrolled by the Seventh to assist if called upon. Otherwise, its primary mission extends to homeland defense and to training and support, ready to back forces in the Western Pacific.

The Sixth fleet of the western Mediterranean is responsible for US naval forces over Europe and the mid-Atlantic adjacent West Africa. Previously involved in the several Israeli conflicts, the fleet has encountered disruptions from Libya, Syria, and the newly-formed states of the former Yugoslavia. In agreement with Egypt, this fleet protects the Suez Canal. The Fifth fleet covers the Middle East in the eastern Mediterranean including the Persian and Oman Gulfs, the Red and Black Seas, and parts of the Indian Ocean as a component of the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Its primary mission directs to curbing asymmetric dangers from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

The Second, reestablished in 2018 attuned to Russian tensions, defends the US east coast and the North Atlantic. Similar to the Pacific's Third fleet, this force orients toward training and support for the two forward-deployed armadas, the Fifth and the Sixth. The Fourth fleet operates in the Caribbean and adjacent Atlantic South America, its mission to enhance hemispheric stability and to promote law enforcement. At its reactivation in 2008, Cuba and Venezuela accused the Command of threats to their independence.

In sum, fleet placements over the decades deployed on margins of Eurasia and along commerce routes, first, because America, as the dominate maritime nation, could extend its power in these directions, and second, because its security rested in unrestricted

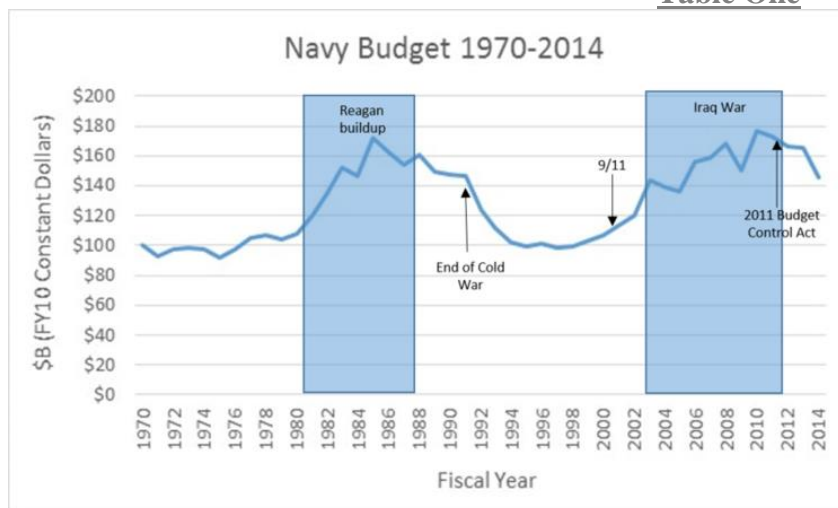
marine passages and in favorable balances among the resident states of Eurasia. Both achievements enhanced American hegemony and protection.

Naval budgets and ship-force levels. Statistics (from Kirkland, Altman, and Solomon 2017) on budget amounts and ship numbers appear roughly to coincide, both declining in strength since the 1960s. Expenditures rose reflective of perceptions of danger (see Table One: Navy Budgets 1970-2014), with peak funding years during president Ronald Reagan’s buildup, also in the Iraq occupation, and of late, to the Chinese and Russian challenges that caused the 2010 naval budget of 142.2 billion to increase to 168.8 billion in 2016. Pressures for additional marine funding during the President Donald Trump era may continue this trend. Otherwise, spending has tended to follow a downward curve whenever these stimulants were not present.

Differing from the occasional budget expansions, fleet sizes steadily have decreased (see Table Two: US Fleet Size, 1946-2016), descending from 900 vessels to a current 270 in active duty, although calls for an increase to 330 arose during the Barack Obama and Trump administrations. Both petitions for expansion reflect concern over Chinese declarations of sovereignty over the South China Sea, as attested to by articles by naval personnel (For example, Joseph Prueher 2017 on an inevitable “Thucydides trap” warfare between the two nations.).

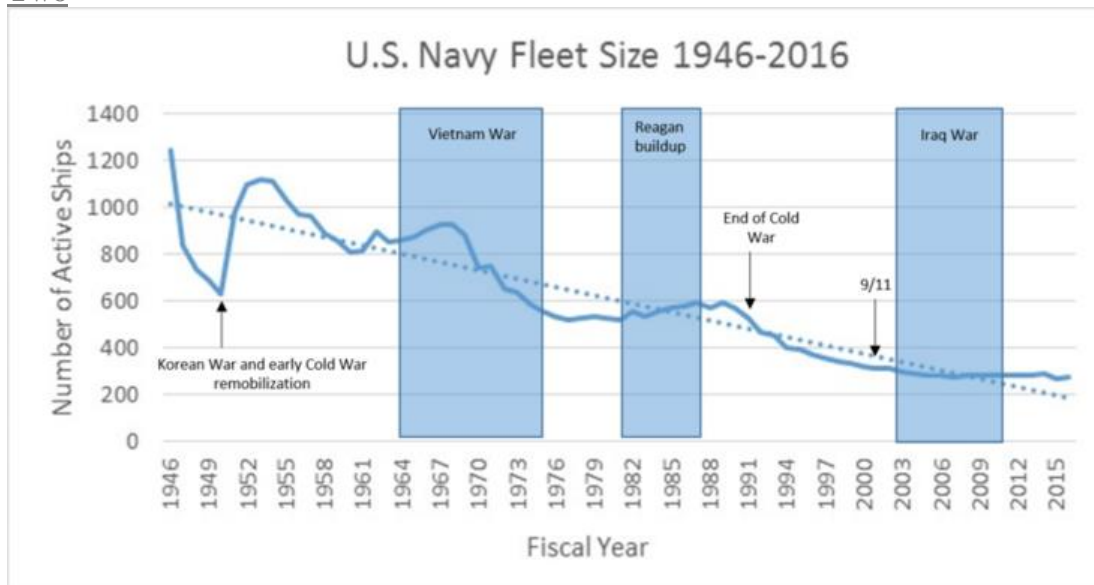
Several articles penned by naval authors indicate a worry over sparse budgets and shrinking fleet numbers when confronting demands for continued forward-deployed naval forces. Captain Robert Rubel (2015, 24), quoting from Deputy Secretary of Defense, Robert Work, asserts “we are going from a demand-side model to a supply-side model in which we are setting forces out that keep a [more prudent] balance between readiness and forward presence.” Lieutenant Joseph Hanacek (2018, 1) argues for a “loosening the leash on presence” by advocating a “latent suasion” stance that carefully measures potential threats before bringing on an automatic “line-in-the- sand deterrence.”

**Table One**



## Table

### Two



Costs of new ship construction, of refurbishing and maintaining older vessels, and of debates on numbers and types of carriers and submarines, and of recruiting, keeping, and training shipmen and officers, have caused a variety of scenarios about how to retain a strong presence offshore with fewer resources. But importantly, keeping the oceans and Eurasia away from endangering the Americas remain as top priorities, and the Navy's budget and force declines have not stemmed these intentions.

### Part Three: A Postscript: Responding to the Chinese Challenge:

As depicted in the two parts above, the forward-deployed missions of the American navy and army astride ocean passages and Eurasian margins steadfastly will continue. This commitment and the strengths underlying American sea power surely should and must remain. But, the international security environment of the past decade has shifted to one less foreseeable and less safe. Three factors are suggested for much of this recent transition: (1) New technologies, including threats from cyberspace and electromagnetic advances, have brought more complexity and less predictability from forces bent on challenging American hegemony (2) A fading of US preponderance is seen in the diminishing strength of the navy in comparison to the Chinese of late, it suffering lower budgets and ship numbers as described above in Part Two. The exclusive unipolar moment of American primacy no longer holds. Hence, in tune with the shifting strategies described below, a more limited sea denial comes easier than an expansive sea control. (3) China's elite, it seems, has decided to extend power over the Indo-Pacific passages and global resources. While the American marine will confront with skill and professionalism this opposition, the new era's disruptions may impede the past American role of safeguarding ocean passages and of balancing Eurasian forces.

The current literature is replete with descriptions of these three points, and this essay's author will stay content with their observations (Holmes 2014; Lehman and Forbes 2014; Manning 2012; Martinson and Erickson 2018; McCoy 2018; Owens 2016; Xiaodong and Qinghai 2017). What will be the intent for these final pages, instead, will be a summary of the several American responses that may temper the present maritime challenges.

Shifting strategies: Official seaward strategies have rebounded since about 2010, away from sea-to-land joint operations in regional conflicts and away from total patrol of the global commons (US Department of the Navy, *From the Sea: Preparing the Naval*



*Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 1992*) to a selective command of portions of the sea ( US Department of Defense, *Surface Force Strategy: Return to Sea Control 2017*) where a US denial of Chinese and Russian access to vital areas is guaranteed: “Sea control does not mean command of all the seas, all the time. Rather, it is the capability and capacity to impose localized control of the sea when and where it is required.” This policy transition would highlight stronger deployments to areas of stress in the Indo/Pacific realm.

Maintaining alliances: A US-led “strategic reliability” of regional allies has been strengthened to enforce free ocean passages and to oppose false claims of sovereignty over the international Asian waters (Abrahamson 2018). The *Cooperative Strategic* (US Department of Defense, 2015) plan emphasized a necessary regional alliance: “By expanding our network of allies and partners and improving our ability to operate alongside them, naval forces [will] foster the secure environment essential” for achieving US interests in the area. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has turned to the opposite, weakening or erasing bi-lateral and multi-lateral ties that might block aggressions. These current actions should be reversed.

Strengthening and upgrading: In response to a “return of great power dynamics” with “near-peer competitors,” the navy needs strengthening both in upgraded technologies and in vessel numbers. And this appears arriving in policy proposals if not in actual fiscal allocations. For a listing of force upgrades, see US Department of Defense, *The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* (2015) that includes allocations of the newest of amphibious assault ships, stealth destroyers, submarines, fighters, and strategic bombers.

Re-deploying to Asia: Taking shape at present is a shift from the traditional two-ocean strategy to a re-deployment of sixty (60) percent of US air and maritime forces into the Indo-Pacific area reflective in large part to the arising Chinese presence. Also due to lower budgets and fewer ships, a “distributed lethality” strategy has emerged, defined thus (US Department of Navy, *Naval Surface Force Strategy, 2017, 9-10*): The concept “enables the goal of sea control at the time and place of our choosing. . . [It] makes geography a virtue. It spreads the combat power of the Fleet, holds targets at risk from multiple attack axes, and forces adversaries to defend a greater number of targets.” That lethality would direct toward the South China Sea and adjacent places under dispute where sea passages could be menaced.

Demanding passage through disputed areas: The Navy occasionally has sent limited patrols through disputed Chinese-claimed areas, asserting free passage within international law. To date, these actions have not attracted armed hostility.

Negotiating with China: Finally, negotiations between the Chinese and the Americans continue. It could be suggested that less US hostility toward China could dissuade its belligerency. Here, one might note a danger in exaggerating a Chinese threat in a blind acceptance of Thucydides’ trap of inevitable conflict. Instead, might China, for domestic as well as for foreign reasons, merely be exerting its enhanced prestige as a rising regional but less threatening global power? It is possible that an attempt at more diplomacy and less hostility could bring a softening in the relationship and a possible joining in a broader cooperation. A multiple-sum game of rewards to both nations might be more practical than a zero-sum contest of one victor, one loser, but this accompanied with substantial losses for all.

In sum, a new security environment awaits America’s response, to be met in the several transitions outlined above. If successful in each, the United States will continue its destiny of protecting maritime commerce and of stabilizing Eurasian balances. If not, Earth may face dangers not fathomed in the current age, these likely of widespread chaos, suffering, lawlessness, and repression.

Conclusions:

Why this rise of a dominant American sea power? And, why its venturing onto oceans and to encirclement of Eurasia to bring America its security? Finally, how best to confront the apparent Chinese maritime challenge? Such queries could be answered by observing placements of the Earth's strategic northern continents, North America and Eurasia, and of the oceans and lands that separate. In these, geography will contribute to either outcome, to the first, an array of spatial qualities that have helped cause a strong and involved US marine, and to the second, a maritime advantage of flexibility and strength that has awarded an American seaward leverage over a distant and divided Eurasia. To join the two, a push factor from North America with its heartland engine for expansion meets a pull factor tied to the American's need to intrude for protection upon distant seas and Eurasian balances and to mellow the Chinese rivalry.

The US Navy's fleet presence astride the global waters and statements from naval officials advocating a forward presence, plus recent adjustments of sea-control strategies, offer further substantiation to the assertions leveled above, all indicating that the present American sea-power hegemony will stay the course for many years to come.

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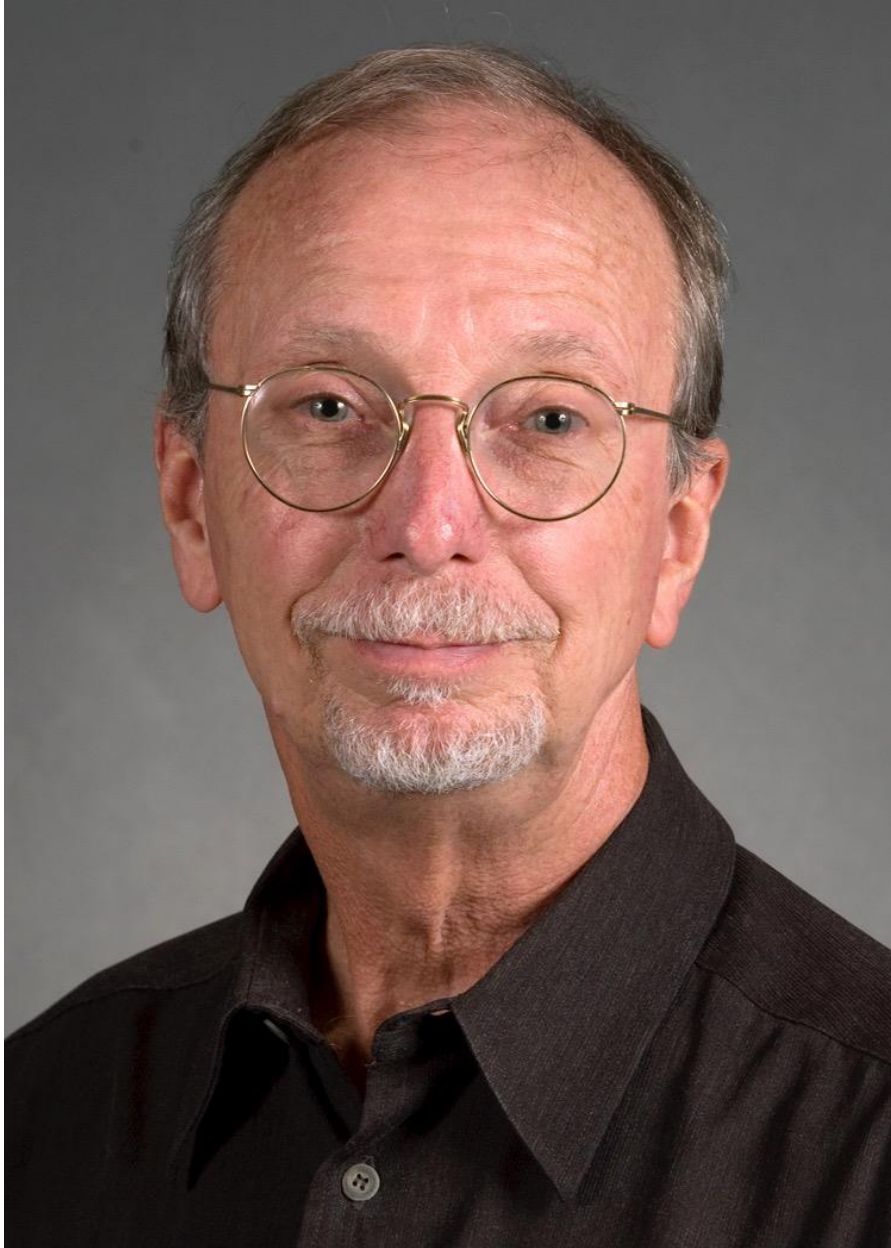
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**Phil Kelly is the Roe R. Cross Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Emporia State University.**

