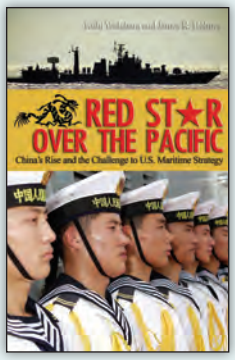

Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy
By Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes
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Reviewed by
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Red Star Over the Pacific is a timely, focused, and persuasive analysis of Chinese naval strategy that stands well above other works on the topic. The patient, solid scholarship and nuanced argumentation of the work offer a comprehensive perspective of Chinese strategic thinking and naval development and their ramifications for the United States. Although cautious in its language, the book leaves readers with a firm impression that not only is the balance of naval power in the Pacific steadily shifting against the United States, but also, more importantly, public maritime interest and naval intellectual power are shifting in ways that are potentially destabilizing for the region.

The irony of the work is that the exhaustive Chinese language research Yoshihara and Holmes undertook, which included an extensive review of Chinese military journals and books, led them back to Alfred Thayer Mahan, a strategist who once taught at their own institution, the Naval War College. They found that over the past decade, Mahanian motivations for robust seapower and a strategy of sea control have become increasingly popular, although not dominant, in Chinese intellectual debates, and that Mahan's ideas are providing a crucial theoretical basis for China's naval expansion beyond its coastal waters. To simplify Mahanian ideas and illustrate China's selective adaptation of his concepts, Yoshihara and Holmes divide his thought into two conceptual "tridents." The first encompasses the larger strategic and historical "logic" and rests on three points: commercial, political, and military power. The second trident is the tactical and operational "grammar" of economic production, shipping, and overseas markets and bases all underpinned by military strength. The authors refer to the two tridents throughout the book to accentuate how various navies have used or misused Mahan's logic and grammar to highlight the strategic choices China has made.

The book's organization, on the surface, appears to have little overall cohesiveness; many of the chapters seem only tangentially related. While this makes understanding the larger argument of the work difficult at times, the embedded Mahanian framework allows each chapter to stand as an independent and compelling argument while still being directed toward a larger intellectual goal. It also seems that the authors perceived this book as an opportunity to answer the questions they have received about China's navy: Who do the Chinese read? (Mahan.) Isn't China's navy just going to end up like Wilhelmine Germany? (No, the United States is in a far weaker position than Great Britain.) Where does Taiwan fit into this? (The Chinese increasingly see Taiwan as a springboard into the Pacific, not the finish line.)

The core of the book is chapters four through six, which delve into the Mahanian grammar of Chinese fleet tactics, missile developments, and China's undersea nuclear deterrent force. Wisely eschewing the acronym-heavy and numerically focused analysis of counting ships and missiles, the concentration is on doctrine and strategic choices. Chapter four, "Fleet Tactics with Chinese Characteristics," highlights a Chinese preference for asymmetric military action involving multiple weapons systems and a lingering preference for a policy of active defense. Chapter five, "Missile and Antimissile Interactions at Sea," shows how recent advances in Chinese missile technology are destabilizing U.S. and allied strategic assumptions about carrier operations and surface warfare. Chapter six, "China's Emerging Undersea Nuclear Deterrent," details the growing interest in China of a robust sea-launched ballistic missile force that would increase the desire for overt sea control of potential launch areas.

Chapter seven is a subtle but powerful analysis of the recent attempts by the Chinese government to promote a historical narrative that emphasizes China's seagoing tradition. While the exploits of 15th-century Admiral Zheng He may look historically inaccurate to scholars, this narrative provides an essential maritime storyline for the Chinese public. Yoshihara and Holmes stress that such efforts are an attempt to fashion a "usable past" featuring a Chinese maritime identity that could be longer lasting and more destabilizing to the Pacific balance of power than any ship or missile.

So what about the U.S. response? Yoshihara and Holmes briefly but sharply apply their Mahanian logic and grammar dichotomy to compare and contrast the 1986 *Maritime Strategy* with the 2007 *Cooperative Strategy for 21st-Century Seapower.* They argue that the 1986 document was almost solely composed of tactical grammar because of the broad consensus on Cold War strategy, but the 2007 strategy is a bland compromise document that is solely focused on vague Mahanian logic. The ambiguity of the 2007 document is perhaps understandable in an era of strategic and budgetary uncertainty, but the authors highlight that this means that Congress, naval officers, and the American public are left with no clear strategic and operational framework on which to build solid domestic support or aid in military planning.

Red Star Over the Pacific fills a significant gap in military and strategic analysis between grand but often empty theories of international relations and overly detailed analysis of specific ships or weapons. The primary argument of the book—that the Chinese navy is an increasingly capable organization that has developed a sophisticated intellectual rationale for enlarging its mission and responsibilities—is presented in cautious and measured tones. The implication drawn from the analysis is subtly provocative; while the Chinese navy might seek (and be able) to control or dominate crucial portions of the global commons, they will not challenge the U.S. Navy on a global scale. If Yoshihara and Holmes are correct and China achieves uncontestable control over areas of the South China Sea and East China Sea, can freedom of the seas be credible if key portions are excluded? Casual readers, naval historians, military officers, and perhaps some Chinese readers should all benefit from this work, which is likely to become a benchmark text in a burgeoning field. JFQ

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