

How the United States Lost the Naval War of 2015

by James Kraska

James Kraska is a guest investigator at the Marine Policy Center, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the former Oceans Policy Adviser for the Director of Strategic Plans & Policy, Joint Chiefs of Staff. The views presented are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Defense. He may be reached at james.kraska@gmail.com.

***Abstract:** Years of strategic missteps in oceans policy, naval strategy and a force structure in decline set the stage for U.S. defeat at sea in 2015. After decades of double-digit budget increases, the People's Liberation Army (Navy) was operating some of the most impressive systems in the world, including a medium-range ballistic missile that could hit a moving aircraft carrier and a super-quiet diesel electric submarine that was stealthier than U.S. nuclear submarines. Coupling this new asymmetric naval force to visionary maritime strategy and oceans policy, China ensured that all elements of national power promoted its goal of dominating the East China Sea. The United States, in contrast, had a declining naval force structured around 10 aircraft carriers spread thinly throughout the globe. With a maritime strategy focused on lower-order partnerships, and a national oceans policy that devalued strategic interests in freedom of navigation, the stage was set for defeat at sea. This article recounts how China destroyed the USS George Washington in the East China Sea in 2015. The political fallout from the disaster ended 75 years of U.S. dominance in the Pacific Ocean and cemented China's position as the Asian hegemon.*

By 2015, U.S. command of the global commons could no longer be taken for granted. The oceans and the airspace above them had been the exclusive domain of the U.S. Navy and the nation's edifice of military power for seventy-five years. During the age of U.S. supremacy, the Navy used the oceans as the world's largest maneuver space to outflank its enemies. Maritime mobility on the surface of the ocean, in the air and under the water was the cornerstone of U.S. military power.¹ The United States was able to utilize its maritime dominance to envelop and topple rogue regimes, as

¹ Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* Summer 2003, pp. 5-46.

it demonstrated in Grenada and Panama, and use the maritime commons to ferry huge ground armies to the other side of the world and sustain them indefinitely, as it did in Vietnam and twice in Iraq. The unique capability to project decisive power rapidly in any corner of the world gave the United States deterrent power and unrivalled military influence.

All that changed in 2015, when the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *George Washington*, forward-deployed to Yokosuka, Japan, sunk to the bottom of the East China Sea. More than 4,000 sailors and airmen died and the Navy lost eighty aircraft. A ship that would take seven years and \$ 9 billion to replace slipped into the waves. The incident upset not just the balance of naval power in Asia, but ushered in a new epoch of international order in which Beijing emerged to displace the United States.

Red Sky in Morning—Sailor’s Warning

The warning signs—the series of political, diplomatic and strategic missteps—had been unfolding for more than two decades. Globalization, developments in the international law of the sea, and the revolution in military affairs aided the emergence of China and other new naval powers. Globalization was a democratizing force among navies. The wealth effect of expanding trade and rising economies combined with the spread of doctrine, training and operational art, serving as a force multiplier. The result of globalization was a vastly improved Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in terms of its force structure and warfighting skills. The proliferation of advanced weapons technology helped nations that historically had never exercised naval power to make generational leaps in precision-guided munitions. Already, a number of regional states had developed or acquired sophisticated anti-ship cruise missiles and super-quiet diesel electric submarines armed with sensitive wake-homing torpedoes.

A collection of unfriendly coastal states had invested heavily in asymmetric anti-access technologies and strategies to counter the power of U.S. naval forces. In 1991, Iraq used a mixture of crude pre-World War I contact naval mines and sophisticated magnetic and acoustic influence mines launched from small rubber boats. The country deployed over 1,100 mines in the first Gulf War, but most of them were either inoperable or improperly positioned. Yet Baghdad still reaped success in using mines to secure its seaside flank off Kuwait City. The USS *Tripoli* struck a moored contact mine, which ripped a 16 × 20 foot cavern below the waterline; hours later, and despite proceeding with deliberate caution to avoid mines, the USS *Princeton* struck a mine that cracked her superstructure and caused severe deck buckling.² The Persian Gulf is a relatively small, semi-enclosed body of water, and in narrow seas mines are an effective anti-access weapon. The Pacific

² *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, Apr. 1992, pp. 199-205.

Ocean, in contrast, is a vast, seemingly limitless expanse haunted by the tyranny of time, distance and space. While Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Ahmadinejad's Iran borrowed weapons from the past, China was developing weapons of the future.

PLA Chief Naval Commander admiral Liu Huaqing promised the twenty-first century would be the "century of the sea." Fueled by a dynamic economy and impressive ingenuity, Beijing developed and fielded a bevy of asymmetric weapons. One game-changing weapon, an anti-ship ballistic missile, could hit an underway aircraft carrier.³ And that is what happened. Without warning, a Chinese anti-ship ballistic missile – a variant of the 1,500 km-plus range DF-21/CSS-5 solid propellant medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) specifically designed to decapitate U.S. carrier strike groups operating in East Asia – struck the USS *George Washington* causing the ship to erupt in a cataclysm.

The Chinese Navy made uncannily progress in the two decades preceding the attack, transitioning from an obsolete 1950s-style coastal defense force into a balanced blue water fleet. Beijing was outfitting its second domestically-produced aircraft carrier in 2015. For decades, Beijing had studied the Australian carrier HMAS *Melbourne* and had tinkered with three Russian carriers, finally placing the former Ukrainian carrier, *Varyag*—renamed the *Shi Lang*—in operation after years of refurbishment at Dalian shipyards. Against these three carriers, the commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet sometimes had operational control over as many as three carriers at once, but this figure included U.S. strike groups transiting from San Diego and Seattle en route to or from the Persian Gulf. These ships could be days or weeks from the East China Sea. Still smarting from the surge of the *Nimitz* and *Independence* carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait by President Clinton in the spring of 1996, China timed its attack against the *George Washington* so that the forward-deployed carrier was the only U.S. flat-top in the Western Pacific.

A speaking invitation from Cornell University to Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui was the source of the Taiwan Crisis of 1995-96. Viewing the president's visit as a move away from the One China policy, Beijing conducted missile exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan. The more lasting impact, however, was that China embarked on massive naval buildup, first ordering Sovremenny-class destroyers and Kilo submarines from Russia, and then developing more advanced ships and aircraft domestically. In 1999, the PLA Navy introduced the sophisticated *Song*-class diesel electric submarine. Reportedly quieter than the fast attack the U.S. *Los Angeles*-class boats, the *Song* was equipped with wake-homing torpedoes and anti-ship cruise missiles. In one incident in October 2006, one of the ultra-quiet *Song* submarines surfaced inside the protective screen of the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk*.

³ Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "On the Verge of a Game-changer," *Proceedings Magazine* (U.S. Naval Institute), May 2009, pp. 26-32.

Admiral Gary Roughead, who was commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and who would later go on to serve as Chief of Naval Operations, was visiting China at the time of the incident.⁴ In 1996, at the end of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, PLA General Xiong Guangkai warned a visiting U.S. envoy, “. . . you care more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei.”

While the U.S. Pacific Fleet was in panic after the *Kitty Hawk* embarrassment over its vulnerability to Chinese diesel-electric boats, Navy Pentagon had just briefed President Bush on its new strategy. The “Thousand Ship Navy,” would evolve into the concept of a “global maritime partnership” and the service chiefs for the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard would jump on board in 2007 and sign the “Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower.” These cooperative maritime concepts were meant to be accessible to all nations, inclusive and inviting. Partnerships were sought for maritime humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and counter-piracy operations.

Fleet commanders searched for opportunities to build partnership capacity along the littoral regions—small boat engine repair for the Jamaican coast guard, fisheries enforcement training in the Gulf of Guinea. Pacific Partnership floated one of the large hospital ships throughout ports in Asia, dispensing free medical care to thousands of grateful patients. The Navy and Coast Guard signed agreements with dozens of nations to share merchant ship tracking and monitoring data. Nations that had little respect for offshore or littoral freedom of navigation were courted, and regional commanders favored the benefits of partnership over the value of preserving navigational rights. Winning “hearts and minds” trumped age-old principles. The U.S. Navy struggled with how to conduct combined, lower-order maritime security operations. China was concentrating on how to win a naval war.

The United States Navy was living off its legacy. The incessant search for naval “partnerships”—“no nation can do it alone”—was tacit recognition that President Reagan’s 600-ship Navy was a shell of its former glory. The country lay under the illusion of naval superiority, but it was a mirage. The self-delusion emerged from an emotional investment in the past and wishful thinking about the future, rather than a calculation of the correlation of forces at sea. In 2012, when the country reduced its fleet of aircraft carriers to ten, down from fifteen during the 1980s, Secretary of Defense Gates assured Congress that the force was as large as the next fourteen navies combined.⁵ Furthermore, most of the other nations with large navies were allies. While technically true when measured in fleet tonnage and missile tubes, his testimony obscured the fact that while the U.S. Navy perhaps could outmatch any other navy in a fair fight, her rivals were not looking for a fair fight. Allies would prove unreliable partners, more intent on avoiding war than deterring it. U.S. adversaries were thinking asymmetrically.

⁴ “Admiral Says Sub Risked a Shootout,” *Washington Times*, Nov. 16, 2006.

⁵ Only nine carriers were available for deployment since one was dedicated to training.

The fourteen-to-one advantage in naval power also assumed that the United States had time to collect and concentrate its far-flung ships against a single foe. The ephemeral 313-ship force structure was never achieved, but it called for eleven carriers, eighty-eight cruisers and destroyers, forty-eight submarines, fifty-five littoral combat ships and thirty-one amphibious warfare ships. But these forces were spread thinly throughout the world maintaining a bewildering and multi-tasked agenda. Given that a 1.0 force presence—maintaining one ship on station—typically requires three ships—one in work-ups and evaluation, getting ready to deploy, one on deployment, and one in the yard being refurbished after deployment—the 313 ships never really promised more than about 100 ships at sea at any given time, and these would be spread over the entire globe.

In 2015, China's navy was somewhat smaller, numbering only a handful of aircraft carriers, sixty submarines and seventy major surface combatants. Beijing also operated hundreds of fast offshore patrol vessels, many that packed a punch with anti-ship cruise missiles. Whereas an adversary like China could marshal its entire national fleet for a crisis immediately off its shore, as well as land-based missiles and aircraft, to face down the United States, the U.S. Navy would have to fight with the forces that happened to be in the region. Additional U.S. naval forces would be siphoned from other theaters, exposing new vulnerabilities for a nation with global responsibilities. By the time reinforcements would arrive—it could be weeks later—worldwide clamor for a ceasefire and peace talks could mean the war was already over.

In the decades after the end of the Cold War, China closed the gap in naval capability, even surpassing the United States in some areas in terms of both quantity and quality of platforms. For example, China concentrated on advancing its large diesel-electric submarine force. Sweden became the first nation to develop a diesel-electric submarine with air-independent propulsion (AIP), which extended underwater endurance from a few days to one month. The first in class of these vessels, the HMS *Gotland*, was leased by the U.S. Navy for two years in order to practice anti-submarine warfare. The *Gotland* proved extremely quiet and effective, and AIP submarines are able to sprint underwater—greatly increasing their attack radius. China integrated AIP technology into the Type 041 *Yuan*-class boats, which followed the *Song*. Having launched several of these smaller, stealthy boats each year since 2004, a decade later, the U.S. Seventh Fleet could never be certain whether China was shadowing U.S. vessels.

The U.S. Navy also suffered problems in readiness and proficiency. Diversion of thousands of officers and enlisted sailors to fill Army shortfalls in Iraq and Afghanistan deprived the service of years of training and operational experience at sea. Promotions were tied to disassociated augmentation tours for stability operations and reconstruction rather than excellence afloat. An entire generation of mid-career commissioned and noncommissioned officers tried to learn counterinsurgency land warfare in the desert and mountains of

central Asia while their counterparts in China conducted fleet exercises to learn how to destroy them. In filling a critical gap between means and ends in ground combat in Central Command, a seam between the two was created in naval warfare in Pacific Command.

The Day After

Americans woke up to a different world the day after the attack. The war was over almost as soon as it had started. Outmaneuvered tactically and strategically, the United States suffered its greatest defeat at sea since Pearl Harbor. The incident—could it really be called a “war”?—had been preceded by a shallow diplomatic crisis between the two great powers. No one in the West expected the dispute to spiral out of control. *George Washington* was conducting routine patrols off the coast of China to send a signal of U.S. resolve. China responded with a signal of its own—sinking the massive ship. The ship broke in two and sank in twenty minutes. The Chinese medium-range ballistic missile had a penetrator warhead that drilled through all fourteen decks of the ship and punched a cavernous hole measuring twenty-feet wide from the flat-top landing deck through to the bottom of the hull. Ammunition stores ignited secondary explosions. Two million gallons of JP-5 jet fuel poured into the sea. The attack was calamitous and damage control was pointless.

While the Pentagon was reeling to determine exactly what happened, a well-orchestrated and pre-planned “rescue” effort was already underway by a flotilla of first responders from China. The Chinese media reported on the bravery of Chinese naval forces, fisheries enforcement police and common fishermen who happened to be in the vicinity of the disaster and were able to save numerous lives. The massive warship had a crew of 3,200 sailors, and there were nearly 1,800 additional sailors and airmen embarked with the wing of aircraft on board the ship. Among this floating city, thousands of souls either incinerated or drowned. In the end, China saved hundreds of desperate survivors floating in the water. Chinese state television filmed distraught young U.S. navy personnel, weeping, grateful to be alive as they were plucked from the oily water. Family members back in the States rushed to Beijing to reunite with their sons and daughters, hosted by the Chinese government and state media.

Beijing denied the attack. China shuttled to the Security Council, claiming that an accident on board the aircraft carrier had created a “radioactive incident” in its fishing zone, spreading nuclear fallout throughout the air and water in the region. The International Maritime Organization had declared the area of the attack a marine sanctuary one year earlier, and China had publicly warned that foreign warships posed an environmental risk to the natural marine environment. The United States, it was suggested, was liable for

damage to China's living and nonliving resources in the oceans, in accordance with the Law of the Sea Convention. Beijing also rushed to the area activists from environmental NGOs to monitor the situation. Expressing solidarity and sorrow for the U.S. loss, China flatly denied that it had anything to do with the catastrophe.

The Pentagon was stunned, immediately ordering warships and aircraft toward the East China Sea. B-2 bombers repositioned to Guam. Submarines in Guam and the West Coast got underway. One Aegis destroyer operating off Hawaii broke away from high seas driftnet enforcement duty to begin the week-long trip to the area. No sooner had warships from the U.S. Second Fleet in Norfolk gotten underway, however, than did Cosco, the Chinese company operating the Panama Canal, declare the passageway closed for four weeks for urgent repairs to the Atlantic and Pacific locks. Closure of the 40-mile long canal added 3,000 miles to transits from the East coast of the United States to the Far East.⁶ The alternative was to take the laborious route through the Strait of Magellan in southern Chile. Considerably safer than Drake Passage, Magellan was still difficult to navigate. The narrow passage was dogged by fierce winds and the inhospitable climate. Half the U.S. fleet anchored in Norfolk was temporarily cut off from the Pacific.

At the same time, street protests to stop the impending transit of U.S. warships through the Suez Canal stung the government in Cairo. The Suez Canal shaves 40 percent of the distance off a trip from the Sixth Fleet operating area in the Mediterranean Sea to the Far East. In March 2008, a U.S. Navy security detail embarked on a chartered commercial ship killed a concessionaire plying the canal, mistaking the waterborne merchant for a small boat threat. Cairo kept the Canal open, but the 2008 shooting and an earlier decision to allow Israeli *Dolphin*-class submarines to transit the Canal fed dissension and elevated the risk of terrorist attack. Only sixty meters wide at some points, the United States and Egypt initiated a heightened security presence along the route, slowing ship traffic. All of the activity further antagonized the Arab street.

A number of U.S. Navy ships on patrol with the Fifth fleet in the Persian Gulf began the two-week transit back to Asia, but to what end? It became apparent that China was doing all that it could to provide assistance to the crew of the *George Washington*—showcasing to the world a kind, benevolent and proactive rescue effort. At the same time, China repeatedly denied blame for the incident. Nationalists honked car horns in China, and the Chinese government funded “spontaneous” rallies of support in selected Chinatown districts

⁶The impact was more pronounced in shifting or transferring cargo between the East and West coast of the United States. Sailing from New York to San Francisco around South America added 8,000 miles; vessels leaving New Orleans and heading to San Francisco added 9,000 miles by going around South America. Emory Richard Johnson, *The Panama Canal and Commerce* (New York: D. Appleton, 1916), pp. 8-9.

in Asia and the U.S. West Coast. With Chinese naval, air and rocket forces on alert in response to U.S. fleet activation, the issue was placed squarely in Washington's lap. Much as Secretary of State Colin Powell had delivered evidence of Iraq's secret weapons of mass destruction at the Security Council in February 2003, the U.S. ambassador to the UN provided details on Chinese missile telemetry to prove Beijing's complicity.

But U.S. credibility was low, and China was in ascent. China's narrative shaped global media and public opinion: the incident was unfortunate and simply demonstrated to Japan and to the world the volatility and danger of U.S. nuclear-powered warships. The explosion was an accident and it would not have happened if the carrier had not been trying to intimidate China. In South America and the Middle East, and even in Europe, the feeling was strong that the ship was an instrument of imperialist power projection, operating in an area where it did not belong. Most Asians were inclined to think the United States should have been minding its own business. Dumbfounded, the White House churned without direction.

A month would pass before the United States was able to position more than three aircraft carriers in the region, and then what? Many Asian governments tacitly supported the United States, but were afraid to do so publicly for fear of angering China. The highly capable fleet of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force rested at anchor in Yokosuka, Sasebo and a handful of other bases throughout the country. Tokyo's four escort flotillas formed around a core of superlative *Kongo*-class guided missile destroyers, which feature the phased-array Aegis anti-air warfare and integrated combat system. But Japan was constitutionally prohibited from taking action on behalf of the United States, and realistically, what could it do? In Delhi, the growing sense of a U.S.-Indian naval condominium, and a common Chinese foe could not overcome the strength of the communists in the government who restrained Indian support for the United States.

A dilemma confronted the White House—would it start a war, claiming China had sunk the carrier? Responsible opinion-makers warned of a holocaust; surely, there was time for cool heads to prevail.

Oceans Policy Blindness

How did the United States arrive at this place? The 2008 DOD *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations* described the new ocean operating environment:

Foreign sensitivities to U.S. military presence have steadily been increasing. . . . Diminished access will complicate the maintenance of forward presence, a critical aspect of past and current U.S. military strategy, necessitating new approaches to responding quickly to developments around the world as well as more robust exploitation of existing U.S. advantages to operate at sea and in the air, space and cyberspace. Assuring access to ports, airfields, foreign airspace, coastal waters and host-nation support in potential commitment areas will be a challenge and will require

active peacetime engagement with states in volatile areas. In War, this challenge may require forcible-entry capabilities designed to seize and maintain lodgments in the face of armed resistance.

The once robust U.S. “freedom of navigation” program, which sent warships and military aircraft to operate freely on the seas, had atrophied by 2015. First, with a declining U.S. fleet, there were fewer vessels and aircraft available to show the flag. More importantly, after the 2001 EP-3 incident, in which a Chinese fighter jet intercepted and collided with a U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft in the airspace seventy-five miles off the coast, the Department of State deemed naval operations near China to be too overt, too provocative. The mere possibility of sparking a crisis with China had made the Pentagon and Department of State shy about exercising navigational rights and freedoms in the East China Sea. Gradually, fewer U.S. warships and naval aircraft were operating in the area in deference to Beijing’s sensitivities. As the Seventh Fleet became less visible in the East China Sea, China’s sense of ownership over the littoral waters grew. On the occasions when the U.S. did assert its right to exercise high seas freedoms, China reacted by condemning U.S. naval operations as an “escalation,” designed to keep China weak and to “occupy” Chinese “maritime territory.”

During the 1990s, the demise of the Soviet Union produced a “psychological distortion,” tempting the United States to become more assertive about equating its national goals with universal values.⁷ But by the 2000s, beginning with the worldwide unpopularity of the Bush administration and the apologizing Obama administration, the United States lost the position of the planet’s self-proclaimed tutor.⁸ Challengers no longer accepted the U.S.-constructed post-war world, questioning everything from the primacy of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency to U.S. counter-proliferation policy against Iran. The international law of the sea was no different. Three of the four rising “BRIC” nations—Brazil, India and China—rejected the notion that U.S. warships could freely operate within 200 miles off their coastline without their permission. These nations did not accept the traditional understanding that freedom of the high seas exists in the coastal zone, extending out to 200 miles from the beach.⁹ For decades China asserted that both the quantity and quality of navigational freedoms available to foreign warships and aircraft was very different within 200 miles from the coast.¹⁰ When China was weak, it suffered the indignity of routine U.S. and foreign naval operations off its shores. But as the U.S. Navy declined and the Chinese Navy became more powerful, China became less willing to tolerate the “foreign invasions.”

⁷ Henry Kissinger, “An End of Hubris,” *The Economist* Nov. 19, 2008, p. 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dr. Ren Xiaofeng and Senior Colonel Cheng Xizhong, “A Chinese Perspective,” *Marine Policy* 29 (2005) pp. 139-140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

The Lesson of History: Tectonic Shifts Occur Quickly

History shows how the maritime balance of power can shift suddenly, rearranging global order. Naval power has been particularly – indeed, even uniquely – associated with the rapid, as opposed to evolutionary, rise of new major powers. Historically, even great shifts in global politics have occurred rapidly: “In 1480, Spain was a collection of little kingdoms, as eager to fight each other as to defend their common interests. Twenty years later, Spain held title to half the globe.”¹¹ Similarly, “[i]n 1935, with no armed forces to speak of and an economy in decline, the United States wanted nothing more than for the world to leave it alone. Within ten years, flush with victory, economically prosperous, and in sole possession of the atomic bomb, the United States became the single most powerful nation on earth.”¹²

The shock of the sinking of *George Washington* transformed Asian security. Clearly, the United States had been unseated. Only more slowly did people begin to realize that the maintenance of world order had rested on U.S. military power, and the foundation of that power was U.S. command of the global commons.¹³ The Army could fail, as it did in Vietnam; the Air Force was ancillary to the Army. To secure the U.S. position and the nation’s security—and indeed for world order—the Navy could never fail. This was an unexpected wake-up call to the United States and its NATO partners who had become increasingly obsessed with counter-insurgency tactics and small wars doctrine in Iraq and Afghanistan, forgetting the lessons of history and great power conflict.

In the past an overwhelming advantage in resources and technology gave the United States an unmatched ability to successfully project power worldwide. The nation’s unfettered global reach meant it could introduce a local superiority of force at any point on the globe. Naval and air capabilities, coupled with dominance in space and cyberspace, served to guarantee U.S. access to the global commons and helped to underwrite security commitments around the world.¹⁴

A shrinking force structure, large, expensive legacy systems ill-suited to asymmetric warfare and an aging, depreciating industrial and technical base meant that the U.S. Navy found it increasingly difficult to respond to asymmetric opponents in the maritime commons.¹⁵ Moreover, unlike the United States, China used all levers of maritime power to achieve its goals.

¹¹ General Charles Krulak, *Operational Maneuver From the Sea: A Concept for the Protection of Naval Power Ashore* (Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997) p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Posen, “Command of the Commons,” pp. 5, 8.

¹⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “The Pentagon’s Wasting Assets: The Eroding Foundations of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2009, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵ Michelle Flourney & Shawn Brimley, “The Contested Commons,” *Proceedings Magazine* (U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE) July, 2009, pp. 17, 18-19.

When China acted, it was the culmination of a patient and focused national plan to couple naval technology and resources to a corresponding political, legal and diplomatic strategy in the oceans. The U.S. Naval force plans had been in disarray for decades. The nation was implementing a “cooperative” naval strategy designed for peace—preventing brushfire wars rather than deterring great power conflict. Meanwhile, the White House, through both Republican and Democratic administrations, placed environmentalists in charge of strategic U.S. oceans policy. These environmentalists championed coastal state control over the offshore areas – both in the United States and in multilateral diplomacy – and this focus played into China’s hands by de-legitimizing freedom of the seas in the littorals.

From the Battle of Lepanto to the Battle of Okinawa, major fleet action was the decisive event in many modern wars. Over the past five hundred years all of the world’s foremost powers achieved their position of leadership through reliance on unsurpassed naval capabilities.¹⁶ Even a traditional continental power such as Russia reached the apex of its standing on the global stage through naval power.¹⁷ The West had forgotten that the history of international security and freedom of the seas was a story intimately woven into the material of world politics, forming the basis for an Anglo-American world order.



¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sergei Chernyavskii, “The Era of Gorshkov: Triumph and Contradictions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* April 2005, pp. 281, 282-84.