

# Influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan on Japanese Maritime Strategy

*Himadri Bose\**

*The Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) resurgence during the Meiji Restoration was challenged by the absence of maritime capability and an equivalent strategic underpinning. In turn, the IJN reached out to Western navies to develop its capability and establish its maritime moorings. The musings of Alfred Thayer Mahan served to fill this void. The IJN studied Mahan's tenets and became particularly fixated on certain ideas which fuelled their tactics and hardened their war plans. Leading into the Second World War, the IJN remained oblivious to self-evident triggers for change, and its deep-seated doctrinal rigidity precluded questioning of the conceptions of Mahan, eventually underwriting their defeat in the Second World War.*

Japan's geography as an island nation guarantees the primacy of a maritime predisposition in its strategic outlook. However, contrary to the steady sway of the sea in everyday life, the growth of Japanese sea power has been in crests and troughs, interspersed with long periods of isolation. From the beginning of recorded history until the Meiji Restoration, Japanese sea power was largely coastal in nature.<sup>1</sup> This period witnessed sporadic maritime episodes, such as two Mongolian invasions of Japan, Japanese conquest of the Korean Peninsula and raids across Southeast Asia by the Wako pirates.<sup>2</sup> The limited success of Japanese sea power prompted Japan to assume a defensive maritime strategy, until the arrival of the Black Fleet of Commodore Perry in 1853,

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\* The author is in the Indian Navy and is currently serving at Kochi in the Indian Naval Safety Team. The views expressed here are his own.



which spurred the shedding of Japan's self-imposed sea blindness. The Meiji Restoration heralded the opening up of Japan to the world and witnessed an explosive resurgence of Japanese sea power. The fledgling Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) had neither maritime traditions nor the equivalent industrial backing of great powers to raise a modern navy. Yet, by 1920, the IJN was the third-largest navy in the world; and in another 20 years, it would go on to challenge the might of the United States (US) Navy.<sup>3</sup> The exponential growth of the IJN had a symbiotic relationship with the colonial expansion of Japan. The rise of the IJN coincided with the period of Mahan's writings from 1883–1914. The IJN was modelled on Western navies and the maritime strategy of Japan was influenced appreciably by the maritime musings of Alfred Thayer Mahan.

The precise measure of influence exerted by Mahan is difficult to determine, but the Japanese maritime strategy came to reflect his doctrines, and his works were read and quoted by the leading statesmen of the day. As competition in naval construction among the major powers mirrored their competition in the geopolitical arena, building programmes were tailored to conform with Mahan's fleet action concepts. Japanese maritime thinkers of the time, such as Akiyama Saneyuki, Satō Tetsutarō and Katō Kanji, were profoundly influenced by Mahan and used his conceptions to further the growth of the IJN and forge government policy. The Mahanian idea of the 'decisive battle' became central to Japanese maritime discourse and experiences in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) further cemented Mahanian doctrines within the IJN. The relevance of Mahanian doctrine was acknowledged by Fleet Admiral Togo Heihachiro, the hero of the Battle of Tsushima, when he wrote in 1918, 'I express my deep and cordial reverence for his [Mahan] far-reaching knowledge and judgement.'<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the First World War, the 'decisive battle' formed the basis of training and steadily impacted the growth of the IJN. The fixation with the 'decisive battle' went on to shape the war plans of the IJN. It was envisioned as the penultimate stepping stone to success in war. This premise, coupled with the lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War, led the IJN to build the largest battleships of the time. The IJN never disputed Mahan's theories even as naval warfare evolved at an accelerated pace. This obsession with selective Mahanian concepts resulted in the IJN's ignorance of certain key technological advancements in reshaping naval warfare.

The article analyses the doctrinal connect between Mahan and leading Japanese maritime thinkers and strategists, while elaborating Mahanian ideas and concepts which became central to Japanese maritime strategy. It traces the Mahanian leanings that influenced the Japanese rationale at various naval armament limitation conferences and framed Japanese maritime strategy for the Second World War. The influence of Mahanian doctrine during the IJN campaign of the Second World War is worthy of a detailed examination and is deemed outside the purview of this article.

#### MAHAN AND THE JAPANESE CONNECT

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) was the first modern military theorist to attempt to explain the influence of sea power in a systematic way; arguably, he claimed to have coined the term itself.<sup>5</sup> Mahan's seminal book, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, was published in 1890. He never assumed that the book would be anything more than a study of applied history aimed at providing a more tangible view of sea power. The sales of the book in the US were far from satisfactory. Surprisingly, the book received favourable reviews in England as it was viewed as an affirmation of British sea power. Mahan visited England in 1893 and received a royal welcome, making him an international name.<sup>6</sup> Mahan's work was being read by leaders of the world as diverse as Theodore Roosevelt and Kaiser Wilhelm and within years, Mahan was a celebrity naval strategist.<sup>7</sup> Amongst Mahan's notable works were three more substantial studies from 1892 to 1907: *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (1892); *Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (1897); and *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (1907). These books examined the challenges of sea power from different perspectives, while buttressing his earlier arguments for 'command at sea' and the 'decisive battle'. The Japanese success in the Russo-Japanese War pleased Mahan and he delightfully noted that the Japanese had practised his doctrines, particularly tactical concentration.<sup>8</sup>

Arguably, Mahan did not postulate an all-inclusive theory for sea power; however, he did try to establish the conditions affecting its employment by nations, such as: the geographical position; the physical conformation; the extent of territory; the number of population; the national character; and the character of the government.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese examination of Mahanian precepts did not align with his bird's-eye view

of the constituents of sea power, but rather converged selectively on his diffused theories on employment of naval power. Mahan's examination of naval strategy can be broadly divided into four areas: concentration of force; importance of central positions or lines; interior lines of movement with respect to the central positions; and the relevance of communications in force employment.<sup>10</sup> By communications, Mahan meant the freedom to use the seas and, as a corollary, the destruction of the enemy fleet. He discoursed, 'A crushing defeat of the fleet, or its decisive inferiority, when the enemy appears, means a dislocation at once of the whole system of colonial or other dependencies, quite irrespective of where the defeat occurs.'<sup>11</sup> Mahan summarised his thoughts on naval strategy by emphatically asserting that 'the proper main objective of the navy is the enemy's fleet'.<sup>12</sup> Naval superiority would eventually lead to the enemy ceding space at sea by avoiding battle or being defeated in a decisive one.

Mahan eulogised capital ships while highlighting the significance of seizing the initiative of offence in a naval war. He was of the view that even defence was insured only by offence and towards this end, 'the one decisive objective of the offensive is the enemy's battle-fleet'.<sup>13</sup> He enunciated that battleships, by virtue of their intrinsic ability to sustain damage and engage in combat in both an offensive and a defensive role, were the backbone of the fleet. His conviction ran so deep that while pondering over the purpose of the rest of the fleet, he avowed, 'All others [other than battleships] are but subservient to these, and exist only for them.'<sup>14</sup> Pontificating on the size of the fleet for success in battle, Mahan added that the battle fleet should be able to 'take the sea and have a reasonable chance of success against the enemy's largest force'.<sup>15</sup> The Mahanian maxim, 'never divide the fleet', and the defeat of the enemy in a decisive battle permeated his writings on naval strategy. He believed that nations needed to possess a fleet of capital ships in a measure commensurate to the enemy, such that they were capable of fighting and winning decisive battles, eventually securing uncontested command of the sea. While professing so, he added that these tactical victories would need to be strung together by a larger strategic objective.<sup>16</sup>

The first exposure of Japan to the teachings of Mahan was via Baron Kaneko Kentaro, former Minister of Agriculture and Commerce. During his tour of the US in 1890, he was introduced to Mahan's seminal book by a friend in Cambridge. He was mesmerised by the book and, as described by the historian Roger Dingman, 'It brought to him

something akin to a burst of Zen enlightenment.’ He returned home to translate the first chapter and gave a copy to the Navy Minister at the time.<sup>17</sup> The Oriental Association in Tokyo published the first complete translation of the work in 1896. The publisher wrote to Mahan that several thousand volumes were sold in a day or two. The publication was adopted as a text by the Japanese service academies and distributed to the Suikōsha, the naval officers’ professional organisation, whose 2,000 members included influential bureaucrats, bankers, editors, businessmen and members of the Diet.<sup>18</sup> Mahan noted that more of his works were translated to Japanese than to any other language. In the preface of the book, senior government functionaries endorsed the importance of the seas and securing sea lines of communication.<sup>19</sup> Mahan’s sea power doctrine provided naval leaders with an academic rationale to make a compelling case for budgetary support for a naval build-up.<sup>20</sup>

#### JAPANESE ACOLYTES OF MAHAN

The purported universal applicability of the maritime strategic principles of Mahan was recognised by those who brought his literary work into Japan. They viewed his postulates as instruments to nurture Japanese sea power. The officers of the IJN absorbed Mahanian thought through the lectures and writings of instructors who had come under his influence and taught at the Japanese Naval Staff College. Notable amongst them were Ogasawara Naganari, Akiyama Saneyuki, Satō Tetsutarō and Katō Kanji. None of them were understudies of Mahan, but used his tenets to further their interpretations of Japanese sea power while making a case for a robust navy. Their work drew on Mahan’s and shaped the strategy and tactics of the IJN. It is, therefore, worth examining their understanding of Mahan and the scope and nature of their influence on the IJN.

#### **Ogasawara Naganari (1867–1958)**

The exposure of the IJN to the doctrines of Mahan began with Ogasawara Naganari, an intelligence officer, the official historian of the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars and also the biographer of Fleet Admiral Togo. Ogasawara was tasked to write the official history of the Imperial Navy to cast a favourable public opinion to seek budgetary support for the naval build-up. In 1896, he published *Teikoku Kaigun shiron* (On the History of the Imperial Navy). In his book, he argued that the rise and fall of sea power were mirrored by the fortunes

of a country. Adopting the Mahanian precept of the pre-eminence of geography in the making of maritime power, he opined that, historically, Japan had surrendered the command of the seas and resigned itself to the seclusion of an island nation, but sea power was essential to maintain sea lanes of communication for trade and transit.<sup>21</sup> He echoed Mahanian thought as he pontificated over its application in the Japanese victory at the Battle of the Yalu River. He went on to serve as an instructor at the Naval Staff College and a collection of his lectures, titled *Nihon Teikoku kaijō kenryokushi kōgi* (Lectures on the History of the Sea Power of the Japanese Empire), was published in 1904. In his lectures, he stressed the importance of nurturing both naval and commercial power. Ogasawara rose to the rank of Vice Admiral and continued to hold important posts, influencing maritime narrative in Japan while championing the cause of Japanese sea power.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Akiyama Saneyuki (1869–1918)**

Akiyama Saneyuki has often been described as the father of modern Japanese naval strategy.<sup>23</sup> He is regarded as the architect of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War during which time he had worked as a senior staff officer under Fleet Admiral Togo. It is safe to assume that most IJN officers who fought in the Pacific War would have been influenced by his teachings at some stage of their careers.

Akiyama graduated top of his class at the Japanese Naval Academy at Etajima in 1890. In 1897, under an agreement with the US Navy, he was selected for a tour in the US and was directed to imbibe the Western naval thought. He was well versed with the works of Mahan and tried to enrol in the US Naval War College, but was rejected due to secrecy strictures of the US government. Not to be outdone, he traced Mahan in New York and sought his guidance. He was rewarded with a reading list on strategy and tactics and was guided to the US naval library in Washington.<sup>24</sup> The Japanese even made overtures to Mahan to hire him for three years as a visiting professor of strategy at the Japanese Naval Staff College. Although this did not materialise, it is indicative of the value IJN attached to the work of Mahan.<sup>25</sup>

During the Spanish–American War in April 1898, Akiyama was fortunate to join the American forces as they sailed from Tampa Bay and could watch, first-hand, the blockade of the Spanish fleet by Admiral William T. Sampson. His observations were recorded as 'Secret Intelligence Report 108' and his analysis formed the building blocks for

the comparable blocking of the entrance of Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War, six years later. His impressions of the Spanish–American War led to the application of the Mahanian doctrine of ‘concentrated fleets’ and the ‘decisive battle’ for ‘command of the sea’ within the IJN.<sup>26</sup> The success in the Russo-Japanese War cemented four key ideas that influenced Japan’s naval doctrine. First was the concept of the decisive battle fought with big-gun battleships. Second was the validity of the strategy of attrition against a superior enemy. Third was the assumption that the quality of naval weaponry trumped quantity and last was the relevance of night torpedo tactics.<sup>27</sup>

Akiyama returned to Japan in 1902 and was appointed as a senior instructor for a course on naval tactics and strategy at the Naval Staff College. With his exposure to the US Navy, he introduced wargaming and tabletop manoeuvres. By 1907, the IJN had classified the US as the ‘hypothetical enemy’, and although this was primarily to harness budgetary support for the navy, it reflected adherence to the Mahanian dictum that naval preparedness should be to combat not the most probable but the most formidable threat.<sup>28</sup>

Akiyama’s efforts at the Naval War College were directed towards preparing the IJN for the challenges posed by the US Navy. His strategic thought shaped the ‘Naval Battle Instructions’ (*Kaisen Yōmurei*) of 1910. The instructions underwent five revisions but remained the essential manual for Japanese naval tactics until the mid-1930s. The instructions enshrined Mahanian theories of decisive fleet engagement, battleships and concentration of forces, and emphatically pronounced, ‘Decisive engagement is the essence of battles. Battles must be offensive. The aim of a battle is to annihilate the enemy speedily...The essential points of the battle are forestalling and concentration.’<sup>29</sup> Akiyama was not a blind follower of Mahan; he observed that Mahan’s concept of ‘command of the sea’ ignored the difficulties of geography when extended to an area as vast as the Pacific Ocean. He formulated the concept of ‘interceptive operations’ (*yōgeki sakusen*), which was meant to lure an American fleet into Japanese waters and then proceed to destroy it in a climactic Mahanian decisive battle. Interceptive operations would form the core of Japanese naval thought for decades to come. Revered by his students and fellow officers as one of the pioneering scholars on maritime strategy, Akiyama died in 1918 at the age of 50.<sup>30</sup> Akiyama, perhaps, did more than anyone else in history to nurture professional education at the

Japanese Naval Staff College and bridge the academic gap between IJN and the leading navies of the time.<sup>31</sup>

### **Satō Tetsutarō (1866–1942)**

Satō Tetsutarō has been called ‘Japan’s Mahan’.<sup>32</sup> Satō was chosen by the Yamamoto Gombei, Navy Minister, also known as the ‘father of IJN’, as a medium to shift the strategic discourse towards the creation of a modern navy. At the time, the Navy Minister was embroiled in a tussle with the Army Minister, Katsura Tarō, over the priority of defence spending, which was skewed in favour of the army. Yamamoto realised that he had to make a compelling case for the pre-eminence of sea power based on theoretical arguments and the historical past, while embracing maritime traditions of Western powers.<sup>33</sup> In May 1899, a relatively obscure young Lieutenant Commander Satō Tetsutarō was sent to England to study naval strategy and history. He spent 18 months in London and made his way to the US for eight months. During his stay in the US, he came under the influence of Mahanian thought.<sup>34</sup> He returned from his academic sojourn and was assigned to the Japanese Naval Staff College as an instructor. Influenced by Yamamoto, in 1901, he published an amalgamation of his studies abroad as a strategic publication, *Teikoku Kokubōron* (On Imperial National Defence). As Yamamoto craved, the publication made a case for the legitimacy of sea power in the Japanese national security architecture. The publication received wide publicity and Satō even had an audience with the Emperor to present him with a copy. The book was published by Suikōsha, the prominent association of naval officers.<sup>35</sup>

The Mahanian scholar, Jon Tetsuro Sumida, stressed Mahan’s observations drawn from the outcomes of numerous wars of the 1670s, that if France had shed a continental mindset and taken recourse to sea power, it might well have escaped certain conflicts, while faring better in those that were inevitable. Satō extended the same arguments to substantiate the case for an equal, if not higher, naval defence budget compared to the army. The guileful use of Sato’s work by Yamamoto proved to be detrimental and earned the ire of the all-powerful army. Consequently, the enraged pro-army politicians in the Diet cut his ambitious fleet enlargement plans.<sup>36</sup>

After a brief interlude of various operational stints, he returned as an instructor in 1907 at the Naval Staff College at Etajima. Here, he proclaimed, borrowing from Mahan, that ‘no nation, however rich, could

maintain both a first-class army and a first-class navy', and declared that the navy was Japan's 'first line of defense'.<sup>37</sup> He began to expand the scope of his lectures by drawing on historical examples of maritime conquests and marrying them with his personal experiences. In 1908, these lectures formed the basis of the publication, *Teikoku kokubō shi ron* (On the History of National Defence). At nearly 900 pages, it became Japan's most definitive examination of sea power.<sup>38</sup>

In his epic treatise, Satō rejected the idea of Japan as a land-based power with a continental strategy, and alternatively submitted a rationale for a maritime strategy. He regularly used the Mahanian thought of 'command at sea'; although the application was limited to the control of waters surrounding Japan. One of the elemental differences in Satō's examination of Mahanian theories was his reluctance to examine the global nature of sea power, while using them mostly to justify the means and ends of the IJN. Albeit like Mahan, he also stressed the links between global maritime trade and naval power. He firmly believed that 'command of the sea' was a prerequisite to control global trade. Nonetheless, Satō's examination of the protection of Japanese trade departed from Mahan as it was limited to guaranteeing access to Japanese territorial waters rather than protecting distant trade routes.<sup>39</sup>

Satō stressed the importance of the single decisive fleet engagement (*kantai kessen*) through his works, and his views were shared by his colleagues and reinforced within the IJN. His inferences from the Battle of Tsushima fuelled his fascination with big-gun battleships and would go on to become one of the fundamental principles of IJN tactics.<sup>40</sup>

Satō bequeathed two important legacies to the IJN. The first was the notion of 'hypothetical enemy'. In 'Preparedness for Naval War' (1897), Mahan wrote, 'It is not the most probable dangers, but the most formidable, that must be selected as measuring the degree of military precaution.'<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Satō examined the concept not from the perspective of intent or probability but more in terms of capability. It was much later in 1913 when he and three of his associates authored *Kokubo mondai no kenkyū* (A Study of the National Defence Problem), where he prophetically declared that Japan and the US would compete for naval domination in the Pacific Ocean, mirroring neo-Mahanian determinism.<sup>42</sup>

The second intellectual legacy of Satō was the calculation of the minimum force level that the IJN needed to succeed in a naval battle with the US Navy. He postulated that IJN would need 70 per cent

strength of the US Navy to prevail in battle. The origin of the 70 per cent formula was in the research conducted at the Japanese Naval Staff College by Satō and Akiyama. The premise of the research was the prevalent understanding that an attacking fleet would have to possess 50 per cent superiority in firepower over a fleet defending its territorial waters.<sup>43</sup>

If the IJN could grow to 70 per cent strength of the US Navy, then, theoretically, the US would never have the 50 per cent advantage needed to defeat Japan. Akiyama opined that this would give Japan a 50 per cent chance in battle, while Satō felt it would marginally tilt the balance in Japan's favour. Moreover, as Mahan had observed, distance had a degree of equivalence with combat worthiness of ships in a fleet, as the voyage corroded its fighting abilities. The distance from Hawaii to the Philippines was 3,000 miles and the authors of the 70 per cent ratio concluded that the attacking fleet would lose 10 per cent of its efficiency every 1,000 miles; therefore, 70 per cent ratio of capability would give the Japanese more than a fighting chance.<sup>44</sup> The dogma of 70 per cent ratio versus the US Navy shaped the future of the IJN and its ultimate defeat in the Second World War. While the debate on whether Satō was truly Japan's Mahan or merely reappropriated Mahanian thought in the Japanese context shall continue to rage, his contribution to naval strategic discourse in the IJN was unparalleled and he remained a steadfast naval lobbyist till his death in 1942.

### **Katō Kanji (1870–1939)**

By the 1920s, Mahan's theories were increasingly being used for amassing support for the fleet-building programme of the IJN. Notable amongst such proponents was Katō Kanji. He had succeeded Satō as the President of the Naval Staff College and absorbed the theories of Satō, particularly those pertaining to combating the US Navy. There is little evidence to make the case that Katō was a follower of Mahan, but he was probably the most spirited opponent of the Washington Treaty. His view of the US as the ultimate adversary was fashioned by the loss of face suffered by Japan during the Hawaiian immigration crisis of 1897.<sup>45</sup> During the crisis, the IJN deployed the cruiser *Naniwa* off Hawaii to signal protection of the Japanese citizens, but the bellicose Japanese reaction incensed the Americans, eventually leading to the annexation of Hawaii in 1898.<sup>46</sup>

His experience at the Battle of Tsushima and his inferences from the Battle of Jutland convinced him that battleships were the instruments

of victory in the Mahanian decisive fleet battle.<sup>47</sup> He was an ardent supporter of the 70 per cent ratio formula and made a vociferous case for Japan at the Washington Treaty.<sup>48</sup> Katō Kanji was considered the leader of the anti-treaty group and argued that the 6:10 capital ship ratio fixed at the Washington Conference guaranteed defeat in a naval battle with the US Navy.<sup>49</sup> From the 1920s to the 1930s, he delivered numerous speeches, making a persuasive case for the expansion of the IJN while espousing Mahanian tenets. He stated that the rise and fall of sea power determined the destiny of nations. He captured the essence of Mahanian economic determination when he argued that a showdown between the US and Japan was inevitable as both the countries would compete for an economic stake in China. He added that as a leading ‘capitalistic–imperialistic nation’, the US would choose the path of least resistance through the Pacific Ocean to channel its expansive energies. He postulated that to counter a US projection of power in the region, Japan would have to build commensurate naval capability. Notably, this analogy of fleet build-up for commercial and naval rivalry was another application of Mahanian theory.<sup>50</sup>

#### MAHANIAN ARTICLES OF FAITH

By the 1920s, the influence of Mahan on the IJN was significant and this point was well recognised in the US Navy. In a 1921 letter to Admiral William S. Sims, President of the Naval War College, William H. Gardiner, the influential President of the Navy League, wrote:

I warrant every Japanese flag officer knows [Mahan’s books]... Mahan is a perfect guidebook to the imperial policy of Japan and to me the wonder is that we are blind to the fact that her overseas expansion is an exquisite adaptation to her entourage of the overseas expansion of England—without England’s mistakes.<sup>51</sup>

While the influence that Mahan wielded on the IJN could be a matter of debate, the strategic response of the IJN after the reversal at the Washington Treaty underscored that Mahanian ideas had become articles of faith. The invitation for the Washington Conference came on 11 July 1921 and shocked the Japanese administration. The Tokyo *Asahi* ran headlines proclaiming that Japan was in grave difficulty. There was fear that the US and Britain were colluding under the guise of a naval conference to scale back Japanese territorial expansion.<sup>52</sup> In 1921, just three years after the First World War ended, Japan found herself in a

full-scale naval armaments race with the US and the United Kingdom (UK). The underlying motives for this arms race were complex and lie outside the scope of this article. However, it was Japan's anxiety at the growing size and strength of the US Navy which led it to initiate its own programme of naval expansion, the 'eight-eight' programme. This programme was conceived with eight modern (dreadnought) battleships displacing 20,000 tonnes and eight armoured cruisers displacing 18,000 tonnes.<sup>53</sup> The key players from the Japanese side at the negotiations at the Washington Conference were Katō Tomasuboro and Katō Kanji. They had diametrically opposite views, with Kanji sworn to military-strategic considerations driven by the 70 per cent ratio, while Tomasuboro had a more conciliatory approach.<sup>54</sup> Japan was surprised by the US proposal for a 10:10:6 ratio of capital ship strength for the US, Britain and Japan. Kanji, true to his navalist leaning, opposed this discrimination and argued forcefully for the minimum 70 per cent ratio and deemed acceptance of anything else as abject surrender.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, Tomasuboro prevailed; on the day when Japan accepted the 60 per cent ratio, Katō Kanji was seen tearfully lamenting, 'As far as I am concerned, war with America starts now. We'll get our revenge over this, by God!'<sup>56</sup>

By the 1920s, driven by the notion of invincibility of the battleship, the IJN was committed to the idea of the decisive fleet battle. The Japanese concept of the 70 per cent ratio was needed to succeed against the US Navy. The reduced numbers agreed at the Washington Treaty led to the development of the Imperial Navy's strategy of gradual attrition. The strategy of attrition was to atrophy the US fleet strength through a series of planned engagements while drawing them closer to Japanese waters. Eventually, the climactic Mahanian battleship engagement in the waters close to Japan would bequeath the winner with sea control of the Western Pacific.<sup>57</sup> The reversal of fortunes at the Washington Conference led to the formulation of a new strategic plan accompanying the 1923 Imperial Defense Policy. The plan assumed that at the start of any war between Japan and the US, the Japanese would quickly seize the Philippines and destroy the small US Asiatic fleet. It also called for the seizure of Guam. It then laid out a three-stage plan for dealing with the US fleet, assumed to be approaching from Hawaii: scouting, attrition (*zengen sakusen*) and a decisive fleet encounter.<sup>58</sup> The IJN planned on watching the US naval movements and with the establishment of the US fleet's course, the Japanese naval forces would begin to concentrate eastward for attrition operations, while the main force lay in wait further

west. The successful attrition would prepare the ground for the main fleets to close in for the decisive battle, called by the Japanese 'decisive fleet battle the morning after' (*yokuchō kantai kessen*).<sup>59</sup>

There were a number of follow-up naval disarmament conferences after Washington. Of these, the most significant was in London, in 1930. As a result of intense negotiations both within Japan and with the US, a compromise was reached. The Japanese acceptance of 60 per cent of heavy cruiser tonnage was effectually 70 per cent, due to American promises to defer construction of certain ships until the time of the next conference in 1936. In light cruisers, the Americans accepted a ratio of 70 per cent; and in submarines, parity with the Japanese was set at the tonnage of 52,700.<sup>60</sup> The IJN felt betrayed by the compromise. The sharp divide between the IJN and the civilian leadership and the predominant influence of the IJN over public perception led to the Japanese government agreeing not to concede to another arms limitation treaty, after the expiry of the London Treaty in 1935.<sup>61</sup> The next round of negotiations in 1936 collapsed with Japan pulling out and the Treaty was concluded entirely by the US, Britain and France. By 1938, all forms of naval arms limitation had collapsed and the world was headed for war.<sup>62</sup>

#### THE GHOST OF MAHAN

Scholars have taken divergent views on the degree of Mahan's influence on the pre-War IJN. Some like Ronald Spector have made a direct correlation and branded the Japanese as 'true disciples of Mahan'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Sarah Paine has inferred that Japanese naval doctrine was singularly influenced by the teachings of Mahan.<sup>64</sup> However, on the other side of the debate are sceptics such as Roger Dingman who have argued that the claims of Mahanian influence are unsubstantiated by evidence.<sup>65</sup> The verifiable truth lies somewhere in between these two contradictions.

Mahan's writings began to make their mark in the world at a time when a resurgent Japan was finding its maritime moorings. Plausibly, it was a marriage of convenience, when the contested postulates of Mahan met a willing practitioner in Japan. An examination of the works of noted Japanese maritime theorists of the time reveals that as the IJN evolved and searched for theoretical underpinnings for an aspirational Japanese sea power, they found the arguments of Mahan relevant. The ideas of Mahan shaped Japanese maritime thought but, more importantly, morphed into a neo-Japanese Mahanian doctrine of sea power, which was limited in scope and constrained by the capability of the IJN. The

first soundings of Mahanian thought by Ogasawara Naganari, Akiyama Saneyuki and Satō Tetsutarō were to enrich Japanese understanding of maritime affairs and bridge the doctrinal gap between the dominant navies of the time and the IJN. During their stints at the Japanese Naval Staff College, they advocated Mahanian precepts to young Japanese naval officers while laying the foundation of Japanese maritime strategy.

In the mid-1890s, the success in the Battle of the Yalu River had brought visibility to the IJN and nurtured aspirations to match the army. The IJN dreamt of a greater stake in the nation's strategic priorities, sought inter-service parity and an increased budgetary outlay to fund its growth. However, it was proving to be easier to develop tactics than a grand naval doctrine which would justify the growth of the navy.<sup>66</sup> This predicament sowed the seed of reappropriation of doctrines for purposes other than doctrinal. The later works of Satō and Kanji were fruits of this flawed proposition.

The Battle of Tsushima in the Russo-Japanese War seeded the conviction that one decisive fleet encounter was the key to the command of the sea and would eventually lead to victory in battle.<sup>67</sup> Big battleships and the decisive fleet battle became the *raison d'être* of the IJN. 'Hypothetical enemy' and the maintenance of 70 per cent ratio of the naval capability of the 'hypothetical enemy', both conceptual legacies of Satō, became cornerstones of Japanese maritime strategy. The ultimate collapse of naval armament regulatory structures in 1938 unfettered Japanese dreams of building mammoth battleships with delusions of their success in the decisive fleet battle. The greatest battleships ever built by the Japanese, *Yamato* and *Musashi*, were obsolete even before their hulls met water. Fixated with the idea of the supremacy of the battleships in a decisive battle, the IJN never foresaw the advent of the aircraft carrier and the subsequent domination of air power. Both the ships eventually fell prey to relentless torpedo attacks from carrier-borne aircraft. Their abrupt and ignominious service careers bear testimony to the flawed application of Mahanian thought.<sup>68</sup>

The Japanese layered Mahanian concepts on their own successes at the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese wars, while forsaking his historical long view.<sup>69</sup> Mahan, as mentioned earlier, identified the principal conditions affecting sea power of nations as geographical position, an abundance of natural resources, the extent of the territory, a population large enough to defend said territory, the character of the society and the character of the government. Notwithstanding the

advantage of geography as a prerequisite for a seafaring nation, Mahan opined that maritime control would manifest itself in direct proportion to basing access.<sup>70</sup> A cursory examination reveals that Japan, by direct extension of these concepts, was wanting in many domains to compete with the US, yet Japanese navalists chose to underplay these gaps at their peril. Notably, after the war, Admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi, a rare liberal mind, voiced the same view.<sup>71</sup>

The original acolytes of Mahan were careful to recognise the US concepts of overseas expansion and the breadth of Mahan's work. The later generation chose his works selectively and interpreted them as levers to establish the primacy of the navy in the fight for status and budget. Using sea power to justify budgets and elevate naval status was a recipe for disaster. Japanese maritime strategy morphed into a series of disconnected steps, stitched loosely to overcome the 'ratio problem'. Mahan's doctrinal cannons were whittled down to tactics and operations. The fascination with the 'ratio problem' and its numerous workarounds eventually shaped their tactics. The time of choosing to go to war with the US was also dictated by the loss of an advantageous ratio in the face of unprecedented US naval expansion powered by the Vinson and Stark plans.<sup>72</sup>

The Mahanian idea of the decisive battle was apparently validated during the Japanese victories at the Battle of Yalu River and the Battle of Tsushima. The IJN's pursuit of the 'decisive battle' led to a warped one-dimensional force structure that sealed their defeat in several battles. The Pearl Harbour attacks were launched from aircraft carriers, revolutionising naval warfare by heralding the era of air power. Nonetheless, steeped in their undivided faith in the idea of the 'decisive battle' with super battleships, the creators of the revolution remained oblivious to the dawn of air power.

As the plans of the attack on Pearl Harbour were taking shape, historian Sadao Asada has written about the ghost of Alfred T. Mahan hanging over the IJN. Even after the success at Pearl Harbour, the IJN believed that carrier task forces should be assigned auxiliary operations, while the battleships were meant for the 'decisive battle'.<sup>73</sup> The IJN did not learn from their own success at Pearl Harbour and fought the Battle of Midway in terms of a fleet encounter centred on battleships. It was not until 1944 that IJN chose to forsake battleships for aircraft carriers.<sup>74</sup> The IJN was spellbound by their obsession with battleships and the quest for the decisive fleet battle, while being blind to the import of convoy

escort.<sup>75</sup> *Shinano* was the last of the super battleships built by the IJN: she started out as a super battleship but ended up as an aircraft carrier after the Battle of Midway—symptomatic of all that was wrong with Japanese maritime strategy.<sup>76</sup>

#### EPILOGUE

A fledgling IJN searched for a theoretical foundation to build a modern navy and rightly chose to examine the applicability of the doctrines of Mahan in the Japanese context. As the IJN studied Mahan's tenets, they became particularly fixated on certain ideas. Fuelled by their combat successes from 1895 to 1905, the foremost amongst them was that of the 'decisive battle' and the attendant dogma of the invincibility of the battleship. In particular, the vindication of this idea at the Battle of Tsushima made it the holy grail of the IJN. So much so that even the Battle of Midway was aimed to draw out the inferior US Pacific fleet into a decisive battle.<sup>77</sup> Till as late as mid-1944, the IJN relied on the one decisive battle to turn the war around. The IJN had developed the strategy of attrition with a plan to draw out the US Pacific fleet westwards and wither them prior to the 'decisive battle'. Contrary to their well-laid plans, the US Pacific fleet won key battles and the IJN was forced to face the harsh reality of attrition in reverse. The most powerful elements of the IJN were kept at bay from these attrition battles in expectation of the decisive battleship engagement. Consequently, the IJN approached these critical battles at reduced strength.<sup>78</sup> The unflagging commitment to the idea of the 'decisive battle' limited the ability of the IJN to think beyond their set plans. Meanwhile, the US Navy, which was also wedded to the notion of big-gun battleships, had started examining alternate strategies by the 1940s.

Technology and doctrine have a symbiotic relationship: technologies carry through doctrines, which, in turn, morph with time to accommodate the progressive nature of technology. The winning strategies of the Battle of Yalu River and the Russo-Japanese War were extended to the rapidly evolving naval battlespace of the 20th century, which was witnessing the advent of air power and the emergence of undersea warfare. Even in the face of these seemingly self-evident triggers for change, the deep-seated doctrinal rigidity of the IJN precluded questioning of the concepts of Mahan.<sup>79</sup> On the contrary, the Japanese maritime strategy progressively solidified over the years and missed the ingenuity needed to address rapid technological advancements in naval warfare, particularly the advent of

air power, radar technology and the increasing lethality of submarine warfare.

The doctrinal rigidity of the IJN was shaped by the discriminatory usage of Mahanian ideas, reinforced by their limited yet successful naval combat experiences. This folly was further compounded by the misappropriation of his tenets to seek strategic parity with the army. The reasons for the loss of the IJN in the Pacific War are multifarious, however a flawed strategy was probably one of the principal contributors. Evans and Peattie have captured the core of this folly when they expounded that ‘the most serious strategic failing of the Japanese navy was to mistake tactics for strategy and strategy for the conduct of war’.<sup>80</sup> The inevitable defeat of the IJN in the Second World War serves as an object lesson for navies against reposing blind faith in contested doctrines while being disconnected from the emergent realities of the battlefield.

#### NOTES

1. Meiji Restoration is recognised by historians as the beginning of modern Japan, from 1868 to 1912, when Emperor Mutsuhito assumed the reign name of Meiji.
2. The Wako pirates were Japanese origin pirates that plundered the shores of Korea and China from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries
3. David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887–1941*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012, p. XX.
4. Sadao Asada, ‘The Revolt against the Washington Treaty: The Imperial Japanese Navy and Naval Limitation, 1921–1927’, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 1993, p. 84.
5. Phillip A. Crowl, ‘Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian’, in Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton Paperbacks, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 450–51.
6. Kenneth L. Moll, ‘A. T. Mahan, American Historian’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1963, pp. 134–35, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1984206>.
7. James B. Wood, *Japanese Military Strategy in the Pacific War: Was Defeat Inevitable?*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, p. 73.
8. Sadao Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States*, Kindle edition, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006, chapter 1.

9. A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, New York: Dover Publications, 1987, pp. 29–84.
10. Thomas R. Pollock, ‘The Historical Elements of Mahanian Doctrine’, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1982, p. 44.
11. A.T. Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972, p. 176.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
13. A.T. Mahan and John B. Hattendorf, *Mahan on Naval Strategy: Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan*, Classics of Sea Power, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991, p. XXV.
14. A.T. Mahan and Allan Westcott, *Mahan on Naval Warfare: Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1999, p. 132.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.
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17. Roger Dingman, ‘Japan and Mahan’, in *The Influence of History on Mahan, The Proceedings of a Conference, Marking the Centenary of Alfred Thayer Mahan’s “The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783”*, Newport: Naval War College Press, RI, 1991., pp. 50–51.
18. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 24.
19. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8.
20. *Ibid.*, chapter 2.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. Ronald H. Carpenter, ‘Admiral Mahan, “Narrative Fidelity,” and the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 72, No. 3, August 1986, p. 294, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638609383775>.
24. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 129.
28. Asada, ‘The Revolt against the Washington Treaty’, n. 4, p. 83.
29. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 74.
32. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
33. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 134.

34. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
35. Ibid.
36. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 137.
37. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
38. Ibid.
39. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, pp. 139–40.
40. Ibid., p. 141.
41. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2. Quoting from Mahan, ‘Preparedness for Naval war’, 1897.
42. Ibid.
43. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 143.
44. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 3.
45. Ibid., chapter 2.
46. William Michael Morgan, ‘The Anti-Japanese Origins of the Hawaiian Annexation Treaty of 1897’, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1982, p. 43.
47. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
48. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 194.
49. Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan*, Kindle edition, New York: Vintage Books, 1985, chapter 2.
50. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
51. Ibid.
52. Sadao Asada, ‘Between the Old Diplomacy and the New, 1918–1922: The Washington System and the Origins of Japanese–American Rapprochement’, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2006, pp. 214–15.
53. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 3.
54. Asada, ‘The Revolt against the Washington Treaty’, n. 4, p. 85.
55. Ibid., pp. 86–87.
56. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 4.
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58. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 5.
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60. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 6.
61. Ibid.
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63. Spector, *Eagle against the Sun*, n. 49, chapter 13.
64. S.C.M. Paine, *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War*, Cambridge, United Kingdom, and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 9.
65. Dingman, 'Japan and Mahan', n. 17, p. 50.
66. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 134.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
68. Mark Stille, *The Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War*, Oxford and New York, NY: Osprey Publishing, 2014, pp. 138–41.
69. Dingman, 'Japan and Mahan', n. 17, p. 61.
70. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, n. 8, pp. 28–30.
71. Asada, *From Mahan to Pearl Harbor*, n. 8, chapter 2.
72. *Ibid.*, chapter 10.
73. *Ibid.*, chapter 11.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. Stille, *The Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific War*, n. 68, p. 132.
77. Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, n. 3, p. 494.
78. *Ibid.*, pp. 494–95.
79. *Ibid.*, pp. 514–15.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 515.