

Maritime and Expeditionary Dominance: Great Britain's Legacy to 21st-Century Strategy

Commander John Trost Kuehn, U.S. Navy

Deputy Director, U.S. Navy Element, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth

OPERATIONS Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom underscore America's reputation as the world's most powerful, influential maritime power. Guaranteed access "from the sea" and "sovereign power forward" provides a critical capability, even in the campaign in landlocked, mountainous Afghanistan.¹

More than 200 years ago the world began to accelerate exponentially because of developments wrought by the scientific and industrial revolutions. At that time, Great Britain and Napoleonic-era France were locked in a life-or-death struggle. That mere water could so frustrate his genius in his 20-year struggle with the British Empire infuriated Napoleon: "With 30,000 men in transports the English . . . can paralyze 300,000 of my Army, and that will reduce us to a second-class power."²

Great Britain's power was based principally on a marriage of maritime power with effective diplomacy. After Napoleon's defeat, the world entered a period of peace with Great Britain as the global leader. The United States is the direct heir to Great Britain's mantle of maritime power and global leadership.³

The efficacy of sea power and the utility of the concept of command of the sea are vital topics for debate.⁴ Alfred T. Mahan's famous 19th-century case study on Great Britain's rise as the dominant maritime power of the 18th and 19th centuries calls for a long-overdue return to the roots of the U.S. Navy.⁵ Also on the hot-topic list is the debate regarding the advantages and vulnerabilities of working within the framework of multinational coalitions.⁶ A synthesis of the themes—maritime dominance and coalition challenges—reveals a link. Maritime dominance, when examined from the historical precedent Great Britain set, supplies

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the methods that might help solve some of the challenges of 21st-century coalition warfare.

The debate leads to the question, "Is a military security strategy based primarily around expeditionary/maritime power-projection better suited to the United States as it advances into the 21st century?" Obviously, it is too late to decide if this strategy is appropriate for today's needs. The United States must fight current conflicts with the tools at hand, tools that were crafted to fight the Cold War.

Maritime-Based Strategy

The historical precedent for adopting a maritime-based strategy is essentially the same today as it was in Mahan's day; that is, it follows Great Britain's example. In the last 20 years of the 19th century, U.S. political and military leaders faced a rapidly destabilizing world. Strategic decisions, based in part on Mahan's influence, led to the U.S. Navy's expansion, resulting in a world-class navy that paid handsome dividends during two world wars and the Cold War.

Great Britain's example is no less relevant today than 100 years ago. Britain, which coupled a flair for coalition warfare with a sustained strategy of maritime dominance, refined a policy that combined aggressive economic policies, maritime dominance, and fighting continental opponents by proxy within coalitions. These are the same methods coalition forces are using in Afghanistan and, to a lesser degree, in Iraq. The British used this method to build a force structure around a large, vigorous Navy and a small (by continental standards), but highly professional, expeditionary army.

When Napoleon posed the most significant threat to its security, Britain defeated him. For over 200 years, British decisionmakers refined the Nation's strategy and in the process maintained the continental (and from a European viewpoint, global) balance of power. Until the 20th century, no other modern Western power had equaled this skillful combination of maritime dominance and coalition warfare to maintain and advance national interests. As it supplanted the British as the leader of the Western world, the United States has subtly and oftentimes uncomfortably borne the mantle of this method.

Important lessons are inherent in this model. British strategy, executed over the long term, proved remarkably flexible in meeting needs during periods of relative peace and during a sustained global conflict with France; in other words, across the spectrum of conflict. The essential elements of power remained the same without a radical shift in strategy or force structure. Forty years after Waterloo, this same strategy enabled Great Britain to join in a coalition with France against Russia in the Crimean War. A similar approach might provide the United States the same long-term benefits.

Coalitions and Maritime Dominance

Particularly germane to America's current situation is how a strategy of maritime dominance proved the most flexible combination when it became necessary for Great Britain to become involved in a multitude of coalitions. For the United States, doctrine and National Security Strategy emphasize that overseas military operations will often occur within the framework of a coalition.⁷ Britain was able to pick and choose coalition partners precisely because its island geography and powerful Navy allowed the flexibility to withdraw, refocus effort, or both. Continental

The USS *Kitty Hawk* conducts a replenishment at sea with the USNS *Rappahannock* and the Aegis cruiser USS *Chancellorsville*, 13 March 2001. The *Kitty Hawk* hosted the Joint Special Operations Task Force during the Afghan Campaign.



US Navy

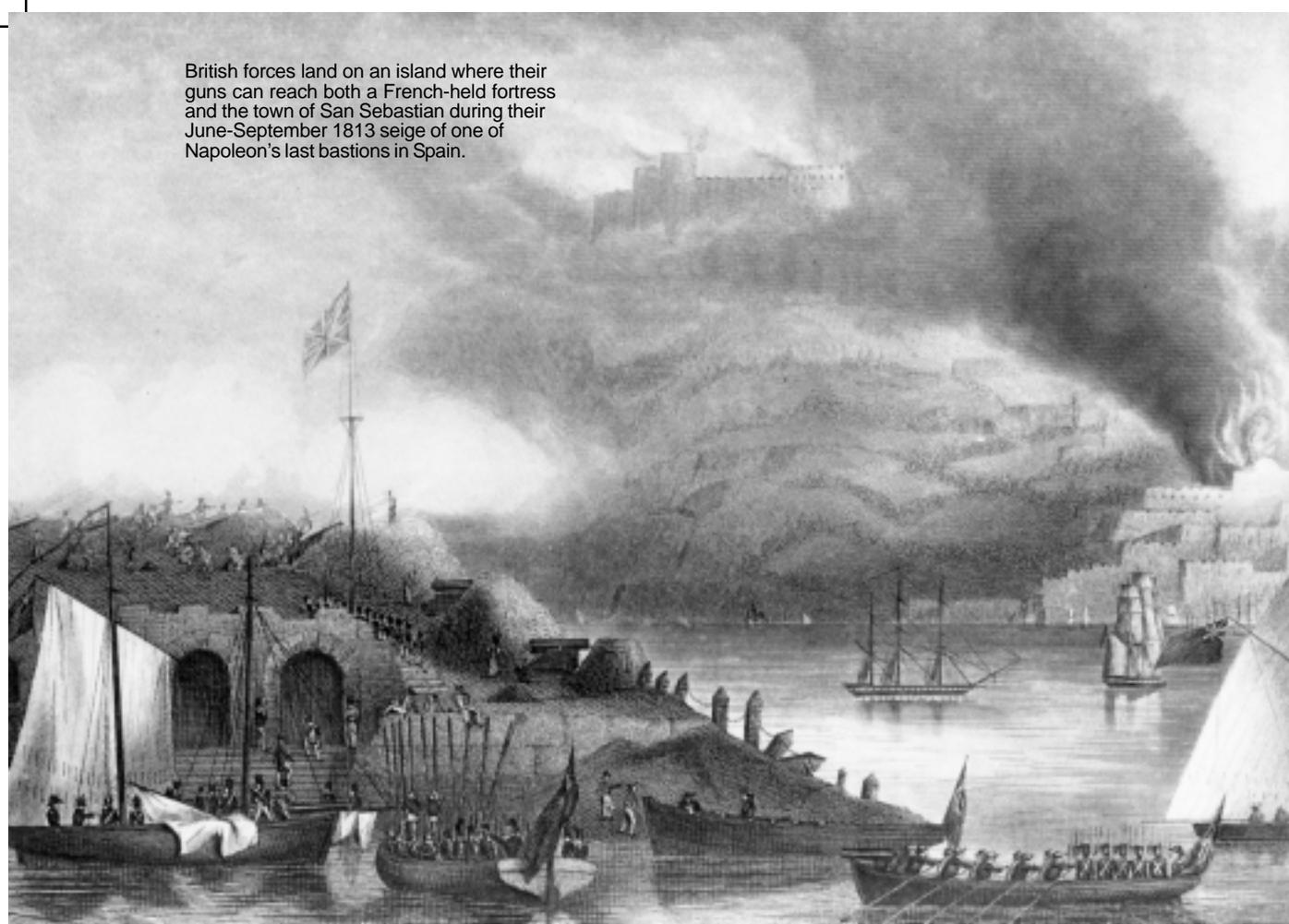
opponents invariably found their colonies gobbled up or threatened; their seaward flanks threatened and invaded; and new land armies raised phoenix-like, all because of Britain's overwhelming maritime, expeditionary, and economic dominance. When a truly formidable opponent attempted to fight Britain with a military or economic coalition, such as Napoleon's Continental System, the strategy failed because its enforcement could only be achieved through naval supremacy. Nevertheless, six coalition combinations were necessary before Napoleon was ultimately defeated.⁸ One might question the efficacy of coalitions, given the number of iterations it took to gain victory in this case. However, "good strategy is never quick but must work to influence events over time."⁹ This is precisely the point historian and strategist Sir Julian S. Corbett made, that Mahan implied, and that recent dialogues on long-term U.S. strategy reaffirmed. Napoleon's defeat was the result of a coalition of continental allies.

A more detailed discussion of the composition of the coalition armies that Britain led, from John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, to Field Marshall Fitzroy Somerset (Lord Raglan) proves illuminating. Marlborough, in joint command with Prince Eugene of Savoy at Blenheim in 1704, commanded approximately 56,000 troops, less than one-fourth of which were British.¹⁰ Lord Wellington's (Sir Arthur Wellesley's) first victory at Assaye in 1803 in India involved a coalition army of 7,000 that included less than 1,800 British troops.¹¹ Twelve years later the coalition army Wellington commanded prior to Waterloo consisted of over 115,000 troops, fewer than 30,000 of which were British. The remaining troops were from Holland, Belgium, and a variety of small German states. Another 120,000 troops in the Waterloo campaign were wholly Prussian.¹² Finally, the French contingent of the Franco-British army deployed for the Crimean War outnumbered the British by 4,000 troops, the actual army before Sevastopol being composed of Turks and Sardinians as well as British and French contingents.¹³ Colonial defeats for the British are numerous as well, but in the main, coalition partnerships served Britain well.

The relationship of maritime and expeditionary dominance to flexibility in choosing partners on a global scale to advance national interests is relevant to the current strategic debate. A maritime power has more options when required to engage in coalition operations, be it diplomacy or the various levels of warfare.

British forces land on an island where their guns can reach both a French-held fortress and the town of San Sebastian during their June-September 1813 siege of one of Napoleon's last bastions in Spain.

National Army Museum



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Maritime Power and Leadership

So, if not the preponderance of military force, what did Britain's army provide in all of the successful campaigns? Leadership. Britain provided a hardcore, sometimes veteran, contingent that often provided leadership at the "grunt" level. But more important, Britain provided operational and strategic leadership at higher command levels. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this is British General Charles Gordon's dedicated leadership of the "Ever Victorious Army" during the Taiping Rebellion in Imperial China, which effectively crushed the 1864 revolt.

Although cooperation between the British Navy and Army was not always of the highest caliber, wherever the British Army wanted to go, it usually did, without fear of being destroyed by an enemy fleet while embarked. We can make extrapolations from this British model to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. At the strategic level, the United States receives global leadership via the President and the Executive Branch, particularly in the orchestration of the broad political and military coalition against terrorism. At the operational level, U.S. Central Command provides key leadership in prosecuting campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Within the Afghan Campaign, at the tactical leadership level, there are forward air controllers; advisers to the Northern Alliance, as the principal land-warfare coalition partners; and the U.S. Marine Corps, with a ground presence in southern Afghanistan, maneuvering from the sea. The USMC played an even larger role in Iraq as a principal maneuver element with British coalition partners and the U.S. Army. Too, a northern coalition front with the Kurds was established "on the fly" using key leadership elements and expeditionary light airborne forces when Turkey denied access to U.S. forces.

The relationship of maritime and expeditionary dominance to flexibility in choosing partners on a global scale to advance national interests is relevant to the current strategic debate. A maritime power has more options when required to engage in coalition operations, be it diplomacy or the various levels of warfare. Using international sea and air space as maneuver media for the military instrument of power makes it easier to gain permission to effectively cooperate with, base troops in, and transit other countries. What might seem to be an operational albatross—the requirement to work with other nations—becomes a strategic advantage.

America's overseas land-based presence has significantly decreased since the end of the Cold War. There has been a two-thirds reduction in U.S. forces in Europe, and further reductions in overseas land-based combat forces will occur in the next decade. RAND Corporation analyst Ashley Tellis argues that Asian bases will become "increasingly costly" because of new threats posed by what he calls "disruptive technologies"; for example, missiles tipped with weapons of mass destruction.¹⁴ Also, overseas bases are costly in terms of dollars for defense and in the political costs associated with the host country. Reductions will occur at the request of host countries and because of political pressure from within the United States. Continued reductions will require the U.S. to increase its reliance on strategic mobility via sea-based forces.

Refocusing Resources

What the United States needs now is a refocusing of resources that recognizes the reality of where populations really live and where the lifeblood of the global economy really flows—from the sea. Water covers two-thirds of this planet, and the majority of the global population lives in littoral regions easily within the range of modern sea-based forces. A force structure based on this reality only makes sense. That an island people such as the British discovered this earlier than most, almost intuitively, was no accident.

The U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, co-chaired by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, recommended a back-to-basics approach using an opportunity-based strategy.¹⁵ A military strategy centered on maritime and expeditionary dominance combined with a complementary, flexible policy that recognizes the utility of coalitions is basic to U.S. national character and tradition. The United States has met the strategic challenge in the past, in the current conflict, and promises to meet the strategic challenges of the century ahead. **MR**

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NOTES

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