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China's "Caribbean" in the South China Sea

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Abstract

Can the United States accommodate the rise of China without the strife that typically accompanies a disturbance to a settled equilibrium? Discerning how China views the seas will help answer this question. We argue that vocal strategists in Beijing look to Alfred Thayer Mahan for guidance on maritime strategy. Mahanian sea-power theory has predisposed many in Beijing to regard the South China Sea much as Americans once regarded the Caribbean Sea: as a preserve where commercial and political imperatives demand dominant naval power. Adjusting U.S. strategy to deter and conciliate a more assertive China is a critical task confronting Washington.

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China's policymakers and military planners are casting their strategic gaze seaward. As they do so, the South China Sea holds as much importance for them as the Caribbean did for the United States a century ago during its initial rise to global power. Indeed, Chinese leaders increasingly view command of the sea as vital to their national interests. To fuel China's booming economy, large volumes of imported energy resources as well as a growing volume of exports must pass through the South China Sea's shipping lanes, where the U.S. Navy now rules the waves. As Chinese planners develop a naval strategy to address their interests in these waterways, many have consulted the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan, America's "evangelist of sea power," who at the turn of the century furnished the intellectual rationale for an expansive U.S. maritime strategy.¹ Judging from their writings and public statements, many Chinese thinkers read Mahan's works in a manner that could prod China toward naval competition with the United States, long the guarantor of East Asian maritime security. Even if Washington and Beijing can avoid a direct competition, however, the logic of sea-power theory promises to permanently complicate U.S. naval planning in the Asian littoral.

Many Chinese leaders view the South China Sea as Americans viewed the Caribbean a century ago.

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