Oceanic Revolution and Pacific Asia

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The ocean forms perhaps the only common denominator of Pacific Asia and it seems a useful port of entry for any exploration of the international history of the region. What follows are merely broad and introductory observations intending to provide a global maritime background for the events that have occurred there in modern times.

In human affairs, the sea plays the role of avenue, arena, and source. It is an avenue for the flow of goods and resources, traditionally for people as well as ideas, and an arena for struggle and combat. Furthermore, the sea provides a source of foodstuffs and minerals, and will offer perhaps much else in the future. Now a frontier of opportunity, it is also a frontier of challenge. How we can exploit these resources without severely damaging the natural environment or inflaming national passions is a daunting task, especially in Pacific Asia where tensions are already high.

Changing uses of the ocean have carried specific consequences to Pacific Asia. Focusing on the early nineteenth century to the present, we can cast these two centuries in terms of "oceanic revolution," a phenomenon that has unfolded in three major episodes, two of which happened during this period and one much earlier. Revolution may now be an overly used term, but in measure of how the ocean is used, it seems apt. Though lacking the drama of political revolution, like the agricultural or the industrial revolutions, oceanic revolution has unfolded in a protracted series of spasmodic change reshaping the world. Thus came the onset of what we recently have been calling globalization.

European initiatives brought about the first burst of oceanic revolution at the turn of the fifteenth century, when intrepid Atlantic navigators

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discovered the world wind system and used it to open global sea routes for their gunned sailing ships, thus establishing a new stream of global interactions. Eurasia became part of a wider world and its two peripheries—China and the European Atlantic states—developed continuing, if one-sided, direct contacts.

Several European historians have suggested that the principal export of Europe at that time was violence; certainly Europeans were belligerently possessive and culturally overconfident. Their behavior was not unlike that of the Scythians, Huns, or Mongols. But whereas the Asian nomads had commanded from horseback, the Europeans commanded from the quarterdeck. For Eurasia, this image depicts both the reality of European power and its limits until the early nineteenth century.

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point between civilizations. But unlike the nomads, even at their acme, the sea made the maritime Europeans themselves a global force, not simply a Eurasian one. Thus they were true revolutionaries.

A papal bull of 1493 and a treaty shortly thereafter attempted to delineate newly opened oceanic space as spheres of influence or stewardship

between the two pioneering Iberian states. But these documents did not declare ownership. Indeed, neither Spain nor Portugal claimed ownership of the watery spaces linking their overseas territories to their respective motherlands, but they assumed the right to control the uses of blue water sea lanes and attempted to exercise that authority.

Other European powers contested these assumptions, following the argument of the Hollander Hugo de Groot (Grotius) that the community of nations shared such guardianship, which included freedom to fish and the right of passage on the seas. The Englishman John Selden advocated the right of nations to claim and enclose their coastal waters. These were, of course, European conceits, imposed on the rest of the world by an unchallenged European command of blue water space.

Thus the Atlantic world began to use its newfound power on the sea to make a global imprint. But that power was limited to the range of seaborne cannon. This was conventionally three miles and became the generally accepted determinant of national sovereignty over adjoining waters.

After 1815 and the British defeat of the French in what has been called the Second Hundred Years War, Britain's Royal Navy faced no foreign challengers and was obliged to put many of its officers on the beach (without full pay or assignment). As one of their captains asked, what then could they do to resist "the canker of idleness"?

Although Britain "ruled the waves," the British made no claim to own them. The British had no difficulty in accepting Grotius' concept of stewardship and oceanic community since they were clearly Number One, and they happily assumed the responsibility for acting as such, if for no other reason than it kept their people active. Arctic exploration offered one purposeful activity, nourishing the desire to find and develop a maritime shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific over the top of the North American landmass. Eurasia they left up to the Russians.

Chasing slavers and pirates was another activity. Northeast Asia lay outside the streams of slave traffic, which were largely Africa-centered, both in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, but the China coast had been rife with piracy for many centuries. Here the British contributed to the security of seaborne trade flows, in which they had great interest as the globe's largest international commercial power.

The Royal Navy also busied itself in gathering geographical information, compiling surveys, and sharing its findings with the public both at home and abroad, unlike the secretive Spaniards or Russians. During the last decades of the eighteenth century, in the spirit of the Enlightenment,

Captain James Cook had set a precedent for publishing voluminous information about his series of remarkable Pacific voyages; these books became instant bestsellers.

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the China coast (this advantage reminds us of the U.S. Navy's advantage during the Korean War in 1950-1953). In 1845, entering Korean waters in the course of a surveying operation, Captain Edmund Pellew, RN, sailed into the Komundo lagoon and named it "Port Hamilton." Four years later, a French ship lacking adequate charts had the misfortune to founder at Dokdo, which they named "Liancourt Rocks" after their ship and its death.

Ownership of Dokdo (or Takeshima) is now in fierce controversy between the Republic of Korea and Japan.

Many North Atlantic mariners, then coursing the world, viewed the islands and coastal littorals that they found with a proprietary eye. Sailors and adventurers did not hesitate to attach their own names or identifications, usually English, to places that might have been known for centuries locally by other names.

The British did not ask permission to land or for any special privileges in Komondo, either from the Koreans, members of the Chinese tributary system, or the Chinese. No local protests arose. Resting on British maritime power, Britain's maritime law became the default law of the seas, and London arbitration the accepted means of dispute resolution.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a second major spasm of oceanic revolution, slower to evolve than the first but equally profound

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The availability of coaling stations became a hot issue, especially for warships and for those who were planning how to use them. Because Britain had a rich supply of coal and

an empire with global sprawl, the new technology of transport gave fresh advantage to the British. Others became newly interested in obtaining coaling stations at strategic intervals on the world's major sea routes.

The steam-powered shallow draft gunboat, able to penetrate inland freshwater spaces, spread the tentacles of Atlantic presence and power globally, exposing hitherto untouchable territorial spaces to seaborne outsiders and establishing new vulnerabilities. China would be a leading example. Screw-propelled, shallow draft, steam-powered gunboats—notably the HMS Nemesis—fought in the first Anglo-Chinese War (1839-1942) against Chinese wooden sailing junks, slithering across sandbanks in search of their hapless quarry, like serpents in a henhouse.

Thereafter, foreign warships routinely began to patrol the Yangzi River heartland of Imperial China, extending foreign authority and influence as the Qing state began in 1911 to fall into disintegration and demise. At mid-century, the electric undersea cable divorced transportation from

communications for the first time in history. By 1871, the cable, providing rapid transmission of news, linked China to Britain and gave enormous commercial and political advantage to those able to tap this new medium. A global wired network would follow.

Steam power propelled Americans across the Pacific to the shores of Japan, ending the controlled access to the outside world that the Tokugawa regime had managed for centuries and the security that Japan had hith-

erto enjoyed in its remoteness from the expansive North Atlantic world core. The Japanese responded vigorously to Atlantic prods, with an all-out modernization effort that by the end of the century would lead to a powerful war fleet and growing merchant marine.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Britain, as the world's greatest sea power, could dominate At mid-century, the electric undersea cable divorced transportation from communications for the first time in history.

the world ocean and world politics. But as the century waned, the rapidly industrializing United States and Germany, joined by newly internationally active Japan, were beginning to emerge as strategic and commercial rivals, each carving out territorial empires in East Asia: Japan in Taiwan and Korea, the United States in the Philippines, and Germany in China's Shandong province. All of these acquisitions were made possible by the reach of sea power.

Thus, industrialization had become international, although with the notable exception of Japan, it was still a North Atlantic phenomenon. A relative British decline reflected new competition, as well as changing tides of tools and tastes, while the industrial revolution moved into a new phase. British prosperity rested upon only a few industries: ships, rails, machinery, and cloth made from imported cotton and wool. The structure depended upon foreign suppliers of raw materials and foreign buyers of processed goods. These vital flows depended upon control of the sea lanes.

Few then recognized that British primacy had reached its peak by 1914, the eve of World War I. One British historian who did remarked in 1914, "The world is on the eve of great things full of great possibilities, probably the greatest being the awakening of the Oriental." He puts this in specific terms: Chinese iron and steel can already "compete successfully with both Europe and America." Labor costs are one-fifteenth that of Pittsburgh and are nearly as efficient, he reported. "The time may come when not only Chinese pig-iron, but Chinese structural steel will invade

the American markets...but one doubts whether the Chinese exports will be transported in American bottoms."

Oil had begun to replace coal as the fuel of preference, thus putting Britain, which had coal but lacked oil, at great economic and strategic disadvantage. Not only did the British then need to buy their energy source, they also had none to sell. The internal combustion engine brought diesel power to ship propulsion in 1912, but despite its greater power and efficiency, the British were slow to adopt it, reluctant to move further into using a natural resource upon which they were strategically dependent. Ultimately this made British ships less competitive and proved to be a blow to the nation's shipping industry.

After two great wars, in the latter part of the twentieth century the world moved into a third phase of oceanic revolution, which is still developing. Air power created a competitive new dimension. In the naval

For the transport of resources and goods, the bulk carrier and the standard size steel box have caused transport costs to plummet, resulting in explosive growth in world trade and global wealth. sphere, the gun yielded to the missile, and nuclear propulsion created new self-sufficiency, providing both tactical and strategic freedom for warships. They could travel wherever, whenever, and for however long they wished. Nuclear power made possible the first true submersible. Thus far, nuclear propulsion has not been commercially viable, but in other aspects, merchant ships have changed in revolutionary ways. For the transport of resources

and goods, the bulk carrier and the standard size steel box have caused transport costs to plummet, resulting in explosive growth in world trade and global wealth. Americans initiated these changes and the Japanese took full advantage of them.

The American Malcom McLean, originally a trucker rather than a seafarer, was first to see the enormous advantages of the container. Another American, Daniel Ludwig, conceived the merits of giant ships for carrying oil and dry bulk materials; he built the first of these in a Japanese shipyard where one of the world's largest battleships had been launched a decade earlier. Nothing remains of this great ship or her sisters, but the skilled draftsmen, engineers, and laborers who had built her were available and eager for new employment. We can say that Ludwig and his associates laid the foundations for Japan's emergence in 1956 as the world's leading builder of ships and Japan's first great postwar international industrial success.

The American consumer and the Asian producer have reaped the commercial benefits of this third spasm of oceanic revolution, contributing to the shift of the core of global maritime activity from the North Atlantic to Asian waters. Thus has been borne out the 1860s prediction of President Lincoln's Secretary of State William H. Seward that "the Pacific will become the great theater of events in the 20th century."

In the late twentieth century, an increasing use of ocean resources prompted the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an attempt to create an internationally accepted definition of maritime jurisdiction. It defines five provisions. First is the boundary of the Territorial Sea, extending as far as twelve miles from shore. Here the coastal state exercises total authority with the exception of the right of innocent passage for ships.

Second is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that runs from the outer limit of the territorial sea to a distance of two hundred nautical miles. Here the coastal state is totally free to fish and exploit any mineral resources available. Outsider ships and planes have the right to use the space as they would use the high seas.

In this second provision, differentiating rocks and islets from islands poses a special problem. If an outcropping in the sea is judged uninhabitable, it can only claim twelve-mile territorial rights. If defined as an island capable of supporting life, it is entitled to an EEZ.

A third provision relates to the Continental Shelf. The presence of a continental shelf may extend an EEZ to 350 nautical miles. But it rapidly becomes a fuzzy matter because scientists cannot agree on its definition. UNCLOS states that a continental shelf consists of the submerged prolongation of the landmass of the coastal state. Yet the distinction between those parts of the ocean that are a natural prolongation of the land mass and those that are part of the deep ocean floor lies in the geological character and the tectonic context of the rock, which is subject to differing interpretations.

The fourth provision addresses the High Seas, an area that shrinks as more nations claim EEZs. The High Seas include all waters beyond the EEZ and are completely open to all, as long defined and practiced by international law. And finally we have what is called "The Area," consisting of the sea floor and what lies beneath it—space outside any territorial claims. We know less about the ocean deep than we know of the surface of Mars, but it is attracting increased attention as a possible source of huge wealth, both of known minerals and of unimagined resource possibilities.

Global climate change is bringing rising sea levels with the threat of resulting new geographical patterns such as global coastal flooding. In

Northeast Asia, one change that may have considerable positive impact is the opening of Arctic sea routes. The possibilities of both a northwest passage across the top of North America and a northeast passage across Eurasia have long excited and inflamed the imagination of explorers. Originally the impetus was to find a shortcut to China from the Atlantic.

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But despite many heroic efforts, both climate and technology made it impossible to create such routes. Now these impediments have faded. Ice patterns are changing with dramatic speed. The Arctic icecap has shrunk to about half its 1950 size. Within thirty to forty years, projections are that the Arctic Ocean will be largely ice-free and regularly open to commercial navigation during approximately four summer months.

The long-hoped-for shortcuts will open, saving distances between present global centers of production and consumption by thousands of

miles. If the pace of melt continues to accelerate, deep-draft Arctic sea lanes could open on a similar seasonal basis within ten to fifteen years. Sea ice will return gradually in the winter but seasonal ice is thinner than perennial ice, and ice-class vessels have the potential to make even winter navigation commercially viable.

The northern location of the world's core economic regions—Pacific Asia, Pacific America, Atlantic Europe, and Atlantic America—means that most maritime trade moves across and between the North Pacific and North Atlantic. The opening of Arctic sea routes has the potential to shift major patterns of global commercial shipping northward. Northeast Asia is situated to derive great benefit from the shorter distances between global centers of production and consumption that these far northern passages would provide to global shipping.

This shift of global transportation routes must cope with many problems. The passage across the top of Eurasia, more likely to develop first than its North American equivalent, will require, among other demands: expensive ships built with reinforced hulls, special materials, and powerful engines; ports en route for emergency repairs and supplies where none now exists; a network of navigational aids, specially trained seafarers; and the incurring of heavy insurance costs. Weather will inevitably inject uncertainties and these can be costly.

However, climatologists say that Arctic routes are not a question of if but when. Northeast Asia is especially well situated geographically to take advantage of such a change. China is expressing interest and South Korea, already the producer of more than one-third of the merchant ships now sailing the high seas, seems particularly keen to play an important role in global oceanic affairs. Yet what happens to the Arctic depends upon the world beyond it. Ultimately that ocean may remain only a remote source of raw materials and not become a major global sea route.

Today, the Asian Pacific South China Sea, linked to the Indian Ocean by the Straits of Malacca, is already the avenue of major trade streams and site of the world's busiest seaports, Singapore and Hong Kong. The western shores of that sea are a leading producer of manufactures for export, and its eastern shores home to the world's biggest seafaring community, Indonesians and Filipinos. The emergence of India, an inter-

national state with a rapidly growing economy manifesting increasing maritime interest, may shift the global balance of economic production and consumption southward. Far northern global sea routes would then no longer offer any advantage.

Recall that as recently as 1800, China and India were responsible for one-half of the world's manufactures. Some people are now suggesting that the Indian Ocean, the world's oldest Some people are now suggesting that the Indian Ocean, the world's oldest in terms of human usage, will emerge alongside the Asian Pacific as the world's vital center of maritime life.

in terms of human usage, will emerge alongside the Asian Pacific as the world's vital center of maritime life. If it happens, such a revival would provide a suitable climax to the third phase of oceanic revolution that we have been experiencing over the past fifty years. And for our lives it may carry sweeping consequences comparable to those that people experienced during either of the two earlier chapters of oceanic revolution.