

## CHINA ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING A SEA POWER — IS THIS THE RENAISSANCE OF A.T. MAHAN’S AND J.S. CORBETT’S THEORY?

### INTRODUCTION

In the context of China’s role in today’s world, last year’s 47<sup>th</sup> World Economic Forum was a breakthrough and symbolic event on many levels. For the first time in the long history of the Davos summit, the President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was in attendance. On this occasion, Xi Jinping gave a speech, which received comprehensive coverage worldwide and was, in fact, an apotheosis of globalisation and free trade (see The State Council Information Office, 2017). At the same time, just after the Forum ended, another event took place, which the authors believe to be a kind of Rubicon of China’s current foreign policy. At a dedicated press conference for foreign journalists, Zhang Jun, a high-ranking official in the Chinese Foreign Ministry, assured that the People’s Republic of China was not seeking to become a global leader, but he declared at the same time that: “If China is required to play that leadership role, then China will assume its responsibilities” (Regilme & Parisot, 2018, p. 5). This was a momentous statement, given that before, despite obvious facts (such as its status of the world’s first/second economy and its largest share in the global trade [see Adamczyk & Rutkowska, 2017]), China had consistently resented imputations of hegemonic tendencies (see Brunet & Guichard, 2011, *passim*; Mosher, 2007, *passim*). Beijing’s increasingly clear intentions raise the question about China’s path to global leadership. As previous research has shown, China is likely to be the first country in the world to implement the geopolitical vision of the land and sea power simultaneously (Adamczyk, 2017a, pp. 4, 13-14). Having analysed elsewhere the New Silk Road (NSR) project within the framework of the land power theory proposed by Halford John Mackinder and Nicholas John Spykman, the authors’ aim in this paper is to contribute to the reflection on modern China’s potential to become a sea power in the light of the power theories developed by Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Stafford Corbett. This paper is thus supposed to complement and cap a short series of studies of Chinese foreign policy in the context of classical geopolitical theories. The argument draws on selected works by Mahan and Corbett, the literature on the two navalists and other sources addressing the PRC’s foreign and security policies. The first section contains a brief overview of the definitions of power in international relations studies. In the second sections, the authors attempt to establish what sea power is and offer their own original definition of it.

The third and fourth sections discuss in detail the features and determinants of the naval power as envisioned by Mahan and Corbett. In the fifth sections, the authors analyse the Chinese potential for building naval power, based on the insights from the previous sections. In conclusion, a tentative answer is given to this paper's focal research question, i.e. "Is China's recent and current policy underpinned by the implementation of the tenets of classical theories of sea power?"

## **POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDIES**

The notion of power brings to mind strength, domination and the ability to act or even to enforce one's own will. In the field of international relations, power is a heavily ambiguous notion and, like many other terms (e.g. terrorism and safety), it is defined in various ways in Polish research on the topic. Among this multitude, some definitions seem rather commonly endorsed. For example, power may mean a subject's (usually a country's) quantifiable potential or a sum total of several subjects' potentials (Sadlocha, 2012, p. 37). In a broader sense, power can be defined, following John George Stoessinger, as the ability of the state to use its material and non-material resources in a way that will affect the behaviour of other countries (in Sadlocha, 2012, p. 37), or more elaborately as: "the hypothetical ability of a participant of relations to use their material and non-material resources to carry out their own will, regardless of opposition or cooperation of the other participants" (Kleinowski, 2010, p. 11). Another interesting definition views power as a collection of "possibilities and the scale of a country's reign over the territory or the environment in which it operates" (Łoś, 2016, 280).

## **CONCEPTUALISING SEA POWER**

The term "sea power" is appears in most works devoted to the wars fought by Great Britain and the United States. Commonly used, sea power usually means a quantitative and often also qualitative and conceptual (within the adopted naval strategy) dominance on seas and oceans. In a study on Mahan's impact on the development of the US maritime/naval power, Sławomir Krakowczyk proposed a different way of defining sea power as: "the political, military and economic components determining a political entity's (a country's) ability to force its will onto other political entities (countries) on the sea and in adjacent areas" (Krakowczyk, 2014, p. 9). Clearly influenced by Mahan, Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, sometimes called the "father of the Soviet Navy," wrote about the naval power that it means "how far it is possible to make the most effective use of the World Ocean [...] in the interests of the state as a whole" (Gorshkov, 1979, p. 1). Mahan himself defined sea power, among others, as the "overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive" (qtd. in Krakowczyk, 2014,

pp. 67-68). The authors of this paper propose to define a country's sea strength/sea power as a set of resources which enable this country to maintain political and military control over selected sea areas and adjacent lands, thereby realising its political and economic interests. The definition includes two interacting components of sea power, i.e. resources and control of the area. In Mahan's framework, the resources/components evidently meant the navy, the merchant navy and a broadly understood infrastructure supporting sea activities, including shipyards, ports and overseas bases (Badeński&Usewicz, 2014, pp. 11-12; Eberhardt, 2013, p. 638). Mahan also emphasised the relevance of a country's solid economy and colonial aspirations (Krakowczyk, 2014, p. 68; Mahan, 2013, p. 31). Mahan indicated that the homeland should manufacture goods to be delivered to the colony by the commercial navy, bringing back only lacking materials (for further processing) and food (Mahan, 2013, pp. 46-49).<sup>1</sup> Quoted above, the Soviet Admiral Gorshkov argued that a country's ability to explore and exploit sea resources, the potential of its navy and civilian fleet (both commercial and fishing fleets) and its sea-related industrial and human resources (scientists, engineers and sailors) (Gorszkow, 1979, pp. 16-17) defined the state's possibilities of realising its interests on the sea.

### THE EMERGENCE OF NAVAL POWER

According to Mahan, the role of the navy should be to secure (merchant) maritime communication routes against the incursion of the enemy fleet, preferably by destroying it in a battle<sup>2</sup> and by blocking the enemy's ports (Baden&Usewicz, 2014, p. 12). He envisioned the merchant navy effecting the exchange of goods between the metropolis and the colony as the economic bloodstream. Mahan pointed out that to function effectively, the merchant marine needed protection from the navy and allied ports. Being a provider of capital from trade with the colonies, it was also to finance the further expansion of the navy fleet and land infrastructure. Mahan emphasised that the key advantage of maritime trade over land trade was a lower long-distance transport cost, which made it more profitable (Mahan, 2013, pp. 29-30; Krakowczyk, 2014, pp. 68-69; Adamczyk, 2017a, p. 8; Eberhardt, 2013, p. 638). Gorshkov also highlights the economic

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<sup>1</sup> Mahan's views represent a significant influence of the doctrine of mercantilism.

<sup>2</sup> It is evident that Carl von Clausewitz's ideas influenced this view as Clausewitz regarded victory in the decisive battle as an ultimate triumph during the war on land (see Clausewitz, 2006, *passim*).

benefits of maritime transport of goods<sup>3</sup> side by side with the political ones, e.g. the independence of foreign trade (Gorszkow, 1979, p. 56).

Sir Julian Stafford Corbett also believed that it was urgent to secure the marine supply lines as the main objective of the naval forces, but unlike his American competitor, he had a different view on control over maritime areas. Namely, he thought that one country was unlikely to attain total, exclusive domination on the sea. According to the British historian, such total domination was possible only temporarily and locally, while a country's control of sea areas amounted to ensuring the safety of its merchant fleet and ships operating away from home ports to the extent that guaranteed victory in a war. Corbett also criticised the Clausewitz-Mahan idea of mobilising the entire war fleet in order to win the battle as, he observed, the weaker opponent could manage to avoid the final resolution, paralysing at the same time the stronger party's communication routes (Handel, 2000, pp. 108-111; Vego, 2009, pp. 2-8; Baden&Usecwicz, 2014, p. 14; Sykulski 2014, pp. 68-69; Sprance 2003, pp. 3-4; Heuser, 2008, pp. 186-196). In Corbett's opinion, succeeding in a war (as both the attacker and the defender) lay primarily in disrupting the enemy's maritime communication and cutting him off from the colony (Corbett, 2005). In his vision, the fleet was not able to win a war alone, and its task was first to weaken the enemy and then to support the land forces. He proposed to perform *joint operations* (so popular today) since only deploying land forces and succeeding on land could help the army to victory (Sprance 2003, p. 4; Adamczyk, 2017a, p. 8; Badeński&Usecwicz, 2014, p. 14; Xie& Zhao, 2017).

As for the need to possess allied ports and naval bases, Mahan wrote that with time, the nation needed ports or locations at which ships and vessels could safely arrive and run exchange, seek refuge and stock up on supplies (Mahan, 2013, p. 30). In his view, it was “no less determining a factor than the fleet itself, as it is crucial for the proper functioning of the latter” (Krawczyk, 2014, pp. 97-98). Undoubtedly, by providing an opportunity to replenish fuel<sup>4</sup> and other supplies (or do the necessary repairs), the strategically located establishments gave their fleet the necessary capacity to operate away from the home ports. At the same time, along with the development of the seagoing commercial exchange, safe destinations were proving insufficient, which became one of the reasons for the rise of the colonies and colonial outposts along the most important trade routes. According to Mahan, most of them were of strategic relevance (due to their location and/or good defence conditions) while others were important trade locations. Rarely did colonial establishments meet both functions simultaneously (Mahan, 2013,

<sup>3</sup> With sea shipment cost lower by over 40% than that of railway shipments; and over 20 times lower than that of road shipments.

<sup>4</sup> In Mahan's times, ships and vessels needed regularly to replenish their coal supplies.

p. 31). Emphatically, the bases could play a classic defensive role (as a safe haven and a supply location), as well as an offensive one by supporting the cruiser operations targeting the enemy's sea trade (Mahan, 2013, p. 33). At the same time, Mahan pointed out that excessive proliferation of distant outposts could be counter-effective as it caused the scattering of troops engaged in protecting the outposts (Krakowczyk, 2014, p. 98). In this, Mahan clearly sided with Frederick the Great's observation that "He who defends everything defends nothing."

#### **INTRANATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF THE BIRTH OF THE SEA POWER ACCORDING TO MAHAN**

Mahan distinguished six factors affecting the sea power of nations (Mahan, 2013, pp. 31-32):

1. Geographical position,
2. Physical Conformation, therein natural productions and climate,
3. Extent of Territory,
4. Number of Population,
5. Character of the People,
6. Character of the Government, therein the nation's institutions.

Mahan claimed that a country could become a sea power if it was located on islands and had an access to open sea, which was characteristic of the United Kingdom. In the context of building and maintaining a naval force, Britain's location offered a number of advantages, the most important of which were the ability to develop a coherent, sustained policy of sea expansion, a relative ease of concentrating its fleet and the capacity to control key sea routes (Mahan, 2013, pp. 32-35). Undoubtedly, unlike France, the United Kingdom could fully focus on the long-term development of its military and merchant fleets, without having to invest in maintaining an expensive land army. Even the French admiral Théophile Aube, a representative of the French *Jeune École* (Young School) and one of Mahan's major opponents, agreed with him on this issue (Weźowicz, 2016, p. 134). Simultaneously, the location of the British Isles in the world made British ports a good starting point for exercising control over key sea routes running from France, Germany, the Benelux and from the Baltic Sea region. At the same time, seizing Gibraltar afforded Britain similar possibilities of controlling southern sea routes and hindered the movement (especially the Mahan-exhorted concentration) of the French and Spanish fleets. Exercising control over the Strait of Gibraltar became even more significant when the Suez Canal was built and, consequently, the Mediterranean Basin became again an important area of global sea trade. At the time, Mahan was one of the greatest supporters of the US digging through the Isthmus of Panama as a means of conferring on the US an analogous status to the United Kingdom and

increasing the significance of control over the Caribbean Basin (Mahan, 2013, pp. 32-35). Importantly, the notion of easy access to an open sea as a determinant of sea domination (and, consequently, of world hegemony) was developed by George Modelski, a US-based Polish scholar, now sadly deceased (see Modelski, 1987, *passim*). According to Modelski, a country's advantageous location on an island (islands) or a peninsula reduced the risk of military invasion and, what follows, enabled the country to redirect funds to enhance its position as a global player instead of investing in a costly defence of land borders. Proximity to key communication sea routes induced the development of merchant and military fleets, which naturally promoted global expansion. Modelski termed such a position an *island of oceanic orientation* (Browarny, 2016, p. 44). Undoubtedly, the influence of Mahan's naval theory shows in Modelski's views.

Within Mahan's framework, a country's natural topography, territory size, resources and climate are supposed to inspire its citizens to pursue naval expansion. A long, favourably shaped coastline, rich fisheries and numerous natural ports (especially the ones located on river estuaries, which ensure cheap inland transport) certainly foster such pursuits as they not only encourage turning towards the sea but also hinder the counteraction of hostile countries (for example putting a naval blockade).

Simultaneously, Mahan underscores that a country's sea expansion is also prompted by certain weaknesses which do not leave it any other choice. For example, poor soil, which does not ensure sufficient food supplies, makes such a country seek food in sea depths, and the scarcity of natural resources propels colonial expansion; finally, a hostile climate and natural inland barriers will curb continental expansion and turn the country towards the sea. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom are Mahan's case in point; the other category in his view, comprises France and Spain. Interestingly, he believed the US to be at the time a country at a crossroads, for though the country's past was connected to the sea<sup>5</sup>, it still focused primarily on the inland expansion<sup>6</sup>. Because of that, according to Mahan, what determined a country's naval power was not its total population but the proportion of its population available for seafaring-related pursuits (Mahan, 2013, pp. 36-45). Notably, the role of the human resources (engineers, scientists and sailors) in building a country's sea power was also underscored by Gorshkov one hundred years later (Gorszkow, 1979, 17).

While these *conditionis sine qua non* of the birth of sea power — i.e. a country's territory, its resources and the size of population employable in maritime ventures—are relatively easy to meas-

<sup>5</sup> The thirteen colonies established on the coast by the British, whom he considered "people of the sea."

<sup>6</sup> It should be borne in mind that when Mahan wrote his *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* (in the second half of the 1880s), the USA was focused on conquering the Wild West.

ure, a nation's special features of character and government are elusive and subjective categories. Given that in Mahan one of the pillars of sea power is well-developed sea trade, it seems obvious that a country which seeks such domination must display a special predisposition towards trade. Such nations, according to Mahan, include the Dutch and the English, who are very often referred to as "a nation of shopkeepers." He also mentions their innate patience, respect for hard work — "they sought riches not by the sword but by labor" (Mahan, 2004) — and their inclination to use all available resources and manufacturing, which results from the former two features. Mahan also indicates that a nation needs to have an adventurous spirit and be ready to take risks to sail across the sea in order to conquer new lands and to trade there. He cites the French and the Iberians as a counter-example, who, in his view, share a disregard for hard work and trade, with every rich merchant in these countries wanting to become a nobleman, and probably no nobleman wanting to increase his assets by being a merchant in remote lands. Undoubtedly, at the time of early discoveries, the Spanish and the Portuguese were really bold; however, their neglect of commerce and labour caused them to wage a bloody conquest and pillage in both Americas, and in the end ruined both continents. On the other hand, the French, according to Mahan, were a nation not only unused to hard work but also excessively avaricious and reluctant to take risks; this is why they never displayed the features that led the English and the Dutch across the sea and towards new, profitable interests (Mahan, 2013, pp. 46-50).

As far as the impact of governance modes on the birth of naval power is concerned, Mahan observes that republican governments did equally well in the past as despotic ones and, inferably, the type of government is not a determining factor in this respect. The key to success lies in long-sustained, consistent policies for promoting the development of industry and sea commerce. At the same time, a government must keep appropriate bases in order to ensure the security of commercial sea routes in case of war. In order to achieve these goals, a government should promote settlement in the colonies, which foster prosperity in peace time and in war offer a safe harbour for war ships protecting the commercial sea routes. A good government should, above all, strengthen its nation's natural efforts to grow wealthy through sea commerce (Mahan, 2013, pp. 51-71).

#### **CHINESE SEA POWER *IN STATU NASCENDI***

To examine accurately the PRC's situation in terms of these determinants of the rise of the sea power, one should first investigate to what degree the area of China corresponds to Mahan's ideal. The US, which remains a sea power, offers a useful comparison. To start with, the area of China is nearly 9.6 million km<sup>2</sup> (and is the globe's fourth largest country after Russia,

Canada and the US) (The World Factbook, 2018a), and the country's location is continental. Although at first glance China is not much smaller than the US,<sup>7</sup> it should be noticed that the American coastline (20 thousand kilometres long) gives the American fleet a practically direct access to open oceans (The World Factbook, 2018b). At the same time, to reach the Pacific Ocean, the Chinese navy has to cross the so-called "lines of islands" comprised of the Aleutian Islands, the Korean Peninsula, the Kuril Islands, the Japanese Archipelago and the Archipelago of Philippines, Borneo and Australia. Most of these territories are under control of countries allied with the US, thanks to which it actually controls sea routes along the entire length of China's coast (14.5 thousand kilometres) (The World Factbook, 2018a; Adamczyk & Rutkowska, 2017).<sup>8</sup> Further on the Pacific Ocean, the obstacles that await the Chinese fleet are American ships which operate from the bases on the "second" (the Japanese Islands, the Mariana Islands [Guam] and the Caroline Islands [Palau]) and the "third line of islands" (the Aleutian Islands, the Hawaii and New Zealand) (Micallef, 2017, p. 17; Middlebrooks, 2008, pp. 65). These circumstances indicate that the strategic position of the US on the Pacific Ocean resembles the one that Britain had with respect to France and the Netherlands: the US cannot only fully control all communication routes of the Chinese fleet but also use several strategically located bases to prevent it from entering open seas. If the Chinese fleet tried to plot the course for the Indian Ocean, the problem of the countries located on the "first line of islands" would remain unsolved, and further problems would come about if the Chinese fleet needed to sail through the Strait of Malacca<sup>9</sup> and to operate on the Indian Ocean itself.<sup>10</sup>

In another territorial respect, the US land border is a little in excess of 12 thousand kilometres long while the Chinese one is 22 thousand kilometres long (The World Factbook, 2018a, 2018b). From the south and from the west, China's border runs through the mountains and deserts; the northern border is mainly steppes, rivers and ranges of rather low, but densely forested, mountains. Generally, China's territory is dominated by the mountains (33% of the country's area) and highlands (36% of the country's area), with the usable plains making up only 12% of the country's area (Encyklopedia PWN, 2018a). This considerably contributes to the fact that barren vegetation constitutes as much as 40% of China's territory, and agricultural land is only

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<sup>7</sup> On Mahan's model, China has a substantial advantage over the USA in that the former's ports are located on one coast, which facilitates concentration of naval forces.

<sup>8</sup> In the US, it is sometimes termed "the Chinese Great Wall in Reverse," which, however, does not protect China but its main antagonist.

<sup>9</sup> Beijing has been aware of its significance for some time; especially that nearly 80% of the Chinese oil imports come through this strait (Adamczyk, 2017a, p. 3; Adamczyk & Rutkowska, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Which India more and more often treats (in line with its name) as an inland sea.

approximately 10-11% of the total area of the country (Iwańczuk, 2003, p. 56; The World Factbook, 2018c). To compare, agricultural land accounts for 7.17% of Russia's area, 11.64% of Japan's area and as much as 18.01% of the USA area, with a population which is nearly four times smaller (The World Factbook, 2018b, 2018c). China's historical cradle inhabited by nearly 95% of its 1.3 billion population, the eastern (coastal) part of the country is most important for its development (Encyklopedia PWN, 2018b; The World Factbook, 2018a).<sup>11</sup> The Yangtze and the Huang He rivers flow across the densely populated coastal provinces, which are covered by thick networks of land and river communication routes, as well as a number of airports and harbours (Encyklopedia PWN, 2018c).

By Mahan's criteria, the evaluation of the Chinese territory in terms of its sea-power potential is not unambiguous. On the one hand, a long land border<sup>12</sup> undoubtedly implicates the need to maintain a sizeable, strong land army. At the same time, the current political situation in Asia does not seem to indicate any real threat of land invasion against China. Despite a number of relatively recent conflicts with neighbours (see Behrendt, 2012; Okraska, 2014, pp. 125-141; Hood, 1992, *passim*), China's current relations with them are much better (in the case of Russia, there is talk of unofficial alliance) as evinced by active involvement in setting up the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the flagship project of the New Silk Road (which is supposed to engage most of the PRC's neighbours). What may cause some concerns (which China directly refers to in the latest issue of its *White Paper*) are border disputes with India and an uncertain situation of the country's western border caused by the radicalisation of Muslims who inhabit Central Asia and repeated terrorist attacks in Xinjiang (Adamczyk, 2017b, pp. 90-91; for more information see Adamczyk, 2016, pp. 13-24). Moreover, the Chinese borders are relatively well protected by natural geographical barriers, and an invasion through the high mountains or vast deserts is no mean challenge even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The relatively small agricultural area of China, and what follows its limited ability to produce food, and insufficient (or poorly accessible) natural resources, e.g. oil (located in remote provinces with a harsh climate) are other features of the Chinese territory which, within Mahan's theory, should stimulate the process of developing sea power. Given all these factors, it seems that despite definite problems with access to open seas China's geographical location and natural condi-

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<sup>11</sup> Unofficially, the population is estimated to be even 1.7 billion.

<sup>12</sup> Comprised of 1533 km with Kazakhstan, 4676.9 km with Mongolia, 3345 km with Russia, 1416 with North Korea, 1281 km with Vietnam, 423 km with Laos, 2185 km with Myanmar, 470 km with Bhutan, 1236 km with Nepal, 3380 with India, 523 km with Pakistan, 76 km with Afghanistan, 414 km with Tajikistan and 858 km with Kyrgyzstan.

tions are relatively propitious. While not equalling Britain's status,<sup>13</sup> China's situation is not as bad as France's, which was involved practically all the time in conflicts on the continent, and whose fertile soil and mild climate did not encourage the French to sail far in search of riches. Paradoxically, in many aspects, China's position resembles America's at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the US started building its naval power.<sup>14</sup> Of course, easy accessibility of open seas should not be underestimated as the American fleet was able to sail off directly from ports on either coast to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. On the other hand, until the Panama Canal was constructed, no controllable key sea communication route ran along the US coast (the only one finished near the Caribbean Islands).

The two last determinants of the development of sea power are rather challenging to analyse. While it is relatively easy to evaluate the geographical location and (dis)advantages of China's territory for the development of sea expansion (especially as compared with other countries), assessing the national character of the Chinese (or any other nation) is a far more tricky venture today. Attempting it, political scientists risk being accused of Eurocentrically skewed stereotyping and of making pseudoscience. However, the existing literature suggests that the Chinese are interested in trading and working hard although it has not always been the case (see Jacoby, 2016, *passim*; Fairbank, 2004, *passim*). During the Imperial period, the Republic of China's period and even during Mao Zedong's rule, China's interest in fleet and sea journeys was quite sporadic, and the country generally "turned its back" to the sea (Cole, 2014, pp. 43-55; Adamczyk, 2017a, pp. 9-11). At the same time, when Deng Xiaoping took the leadership of the state, not only did China grow economically, but it also gradually opened to the world. In effect, its interest in sea commerce, international trading and building a stronger fleet increased.

In this respect, the Chinese policy is consistent, just as Mahan demanded. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's trade and investment engagement in Africa began, and after some time it expanded onto Europe and South America. Similarly to the colonial empires, China paved its way to the resources and produce it needed, at the same time obtaining an access to outlets for its cheap industrial products. What distinguishes Beijing's policy towards developing countries (notwithstanding the continent) from the policy pursued by the past and present colonial powers is the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of these countries, which, combined with substantial support from China (low interest rate loans, developmental aid and investments in infrastructure), petrifies their inefficient regimes and perpetuates the Chinese presence without

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<sup>13</sup> It should be remembered that Mahan was considered to be an Anglophile and as such could have overestimated the British potential.

<sup>14</sup> Which was for a long time involved in numerous land "interventions" in Mexico.

any need for military action (see Firmanty, 2013, *passim*; Kopiński, 2009, pp. 221-232; Winiecki, 2010, pp. 32-37). It should be noted that China consistently develops its — both commercial and military — fleet and the naval infrastructure in parallel with its economic sea expansion. The Chinese sea ports tranship over 1.5 billion tonnes of goods annually (Encyklopedia PWN, 2018b); China's commercial fleet consists of over 4200 ships (including nearly 500 tankers), and the number is constantly growing (The World Factbook, 2018a; for more information see Blasko, 2016, pp. 91-99). The same is true about the Chinese military fleet, where introducing the first aircraft carrier to service and launching another (home-built) one are the symbols of China's growing naval power. Importantly, the development of the PRC's military fleet was made possible by increasing expenses on the military consistently and dynamically over several decades (Adamczyk&Rutkowska, 2017). In effect, the navy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has acquired a number of modern ships either purchased abroad or constructed domestically (Mc Devitt, 2016, pp. 84-90; Heginbotham et al., 2015, pp. 29-31; Symonides, 2014, pp. 199-216).<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the need to have the navy secure the country's overseas interests and the need to develop the capacity to conduct joint operations, i.e. "blue water" activities, are openly discussed in China (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2016, pp. 68-69; Adamczyk, 2017b, pp. 92-93). Constructing and purchasing warships (such as aircraft carriers or landing craft) clearly suggest that Beijing aspires to be capable of projecting its forces far away from home ports, in accordance with Corbett's aforementioned vision of naval and land war.

Overseas bases are the last element of sea power which the Chinese government has been building for several years now. In its vicinity, China is robustly engaged in militarising small islands on the South China Sea. Beijing has been consistently trying to solve the problem of "the first line of islands" by drawing the threat away from its coast; in order to do that, China is seeking to improve its capacity to block the US and their allies' fleets access (Czulda, 2016; Specia, Takkunen, 2018)<sup>16</sup>. Bases for ships and submarines have been set up in some of the bases. New ports and petrol stations capable of servicing Chinese ships and craft are being built in countries which side with the PRC and are located along the route leading across the Indian Ocean (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh) and further to the Persian Peninsula (Pakistan) or Europe and the ports on the Atlantic coast of both Americas (Djibouti, Kenya, Seychelles, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe) (Karczewski, 2012, p. 35; Rajagopalan, 2018; Panda, 2017; Repeutowicz, 2017; Kynge et al., 2017). Moreover, according to the Financial Times journalists, Chinese

<sup>15</sup> Also owing to the knowledge China acquired by copying the systems of naval arms purchased abroad, ship engines or whole ships.

<sup>16</sup> What is more, China is engaged in launching seafaring through the Antarctica, which has long seemed to be Russia's domain (Behrendt, 2018).

ships and craft can also be seen in the ports of US-allied countries (Australia, Greece), by no means on a courtesy visit (Kynge et al., 2017). Although these may be wild speculations now, the strong Chinese influence on the policy of Canberra and China's interest to rent the port in Piraeus have not been a secret for long.

## CONCLUSION

As pointed out, analysing China's potential of becoming a naval power within Mahan's framework, we do not obtain conclusive answers. On the one hand, China's extensive territory with long borders requires substantial expenses for development and defence, which could otherwise be invested in sea expansion. On the other hand, however, the Chinese international environment on the continent is rather favourable (except territorial disputes with India and domestic problems), so potential threats to the security of the state may appear from the sea. China's situation in terms of raw materials is also ambiguous. Undoubtedly, limited food supplies encourage Beijing to look for food at sea (rich fishery in the vicinity of the disputed islets in the East and South China Seas) or in distant countries (for example, the largest exporter of maize to China is Ukraine, followed by the US). At the same time, China boasts significant deposits of coal, gas and oil, which, however, cannot fully meet the domestic demand as they are unfavourably located in distant provinces, poorly connected to the coast (Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang). Importantly, the Chinese coastline is not only long enough but also well developed, with about 90% of the Chinese population (officially estimated at over 1.3 billion) living in the coastal zone. Mahan's theory suggests that such a population could be a promising factor in overseas expansion although, as China's history has shown, this has not been the case all too often. In addition, the relative proximity of potentially antagonistic US allies may prevent the Chinese fleet from freeing up into open waters, and should a conflict break out, it would likely doom it to idleness in ports. At the same time, the decision-makers in Beijing, probably aware of the limitations resulting from China's geographic location and lack of maritime traditions, are putting a lot of effort into boosting the country's sea power, and, more importantly, their policy in this respect is extremely consistent and stable. First, the domestic economy was bolstered and, simultaneously, emphasis was put on the development of foreign trade (as a source of capital), followed by investment expansion (China's twenty-first century equivalent of colonialism). This gave China both new markets to sell its produce and new sources from which to obtain domestically scarce resources. With the economic development, the commercial and military fleet have been growing, which currently belong among the largest ones in the world (though undoubtedly falling short of the American fleet). The next step is to overcome the limitations resulting from

the proximity of the “first line of islands” and to acquire friendly bases and ports near the major sea trade routes. Does the People’s Republic of China implement Mahan’s ideas to build its naval power? Although it seems doubtful that such designs were made at the dawn of the Deng era and have been consistently executed ever since, it is also hard not to notice that over the last two decades Beijing’s efforts have perfectly aligned with the guidelines of the US marine theorist. Is China able to become a sea power? It is still too early to answer this question. As already pointed out in the previous paper, it is unlikely that the United States would passively watch China’s sea potential develop to the point of challenging American hegemony. This is probably why China is committed to a parallel attempt to build its land power based on the NSR project. It can serve as a kind of protection if it proves too difficult to undermine the US domination on the seas and oceans. On the other hand, the Chinese people are known to be very patient by nature and, despite all the obstacles and limitations, this may turn out to be the key to China’s success on its road to becoming a naval power.

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