The Chinese Navy’s hidden European past:
How the study of European history is key to understanding China’s naval rise

By Iskander Rehman
Few sights can inspire a more powerful sense of nostalgia than the sun-drenched, shattered columns of an ancient ruin. In one of the most moving missives in classical literature, a Roman, Servus Sulpicius, wrote to his friend, the great statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero, to console him of the untimely passing of his cherished daughter. Sailing through the balmy waters which surrounded the once great city-state of Corinth, Sulpicius observed that the Saronic Gulf, which had once formed the bustling epicentre of the Western World, now formed little more than a dead lake, lapping forlornly against the shores of ‘oppidum cadavera’ – the corpses of formerly mighty cities which had since sunk into insignificance.¹ A century earlier, the famed Greek Historian Polybius had let out his own warning cry – lamenting the fact that his once illustrious countrymen, through the combined effects of factional in-fighting, precipitous demographic decline and the manifold ‘pleasures born out of an idle life’ had been reduced to minor geopolitical players within the Euro-Mediterranean universe they had themselves help create.² When parsing such melancholy-infused declarations, it is difficult not to draw a parallel with contemporary events.

The European continent, which for decades formed a vibrant, structural pole of the modern world, appears caught in the spiral of its own decline. Mired in internecinal disputes, and reeling under the weight of a seemingly unending Euro-crisis, Europe’s vision of its place in the world appears to lack both substance and coherence. At a time when the United States is increasingly focusing its attention on Asia, and the corridors and conference rooms of Washington hum with talk of China’s rise, Brussels appears singularly oblivious – or indifferent – to the significance of the tectonic shifts currently underway in Asia. Absent a profound effort to renew its strategic vision, the European continent may well become this century’s land of melancholy – a place which, in the words of an astute observer, forms little more than a ‘suburb of contemporary geopolitics, […] whose inhabitants have little or no say on global affairs.’³ The risk of irrelevance is compounded by the crippling effects of austerity measures on many European nations’ military capabilities, which may lead to countries with proud naval traditions, such as France and the United Kingdom, no longer being able to project power in a meaningful manner beyond the Old Continent’s immediate maritime periphery. It would be an error, however, for Washington to completely dissociate its waning European allies from its pivot towards Asia.

Indeed, as this ‘Long Post’ will attempt to show, European history is replete with significant moments which can serve to elucidate some of the more complex – and potentially disquieting – facets of China’s emergence as a major geopolitical actor. Every nation is, to some degree, the sum of its historical experiences. By more closely enmeshing European countries – and their attendant strategic communities, within the ongoing debate over
fraught issues such as China’s naval rise, the United States’ understanding of Beijing’s concerns and ambitions will find itself both much enriched, and greatly enhanced.

The great nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Hegel once noted wryly that the only lesson to be derived from history was that no people, or government, ever seemed willing – or able – to act on the principles it provided. Known to be of a glum disposition, the Teutonic Sage was lamenting the fact that mankind seemed singularly reticent to follow the great flow of history, preferring to merely drift aimlessly along its minor currents.

Nowadays, however, there appears to be no dearth of analyses which reach for reassuringly static renditions of the past to better gauge the shifting nature of the present. China’s rise, and the concurrent expansion of its navy, in particular, seems to have prompted a battery of nervous analogies with the maritime expansionism of Wilhelmine Germany. This is inevitably accompanied by disheartening depictions of a United States as a crumbling Rome, or as a twenty-first century United Kingdom, thrashing in its last throes of empire. While these comparisons are not entirely without merit, they are both too frequent – and too few. Other analogies can be made, which will inevitably be just as flawed (after all no historical parallel can hold claim to perfection) but which could also contain some potentially useful insights. Here follows a brief attempt to lay out three under-utilised historical analogies which could help in the understanding – and if need be in the countering – of China’s naval rise.
1. Ancient Rome during the Punic Wars: the leap from land to sea

When people reach for a classical equivalent to the United States, the choice seems to inevitably turn towards Ancient Rome. This glorious ancient civilisation, defined for thousands of years by a sense of cultural unity under a common tongue, and an unparalleled prowess in both civil engineering and the exercise of military power, appears to provide a singularly apt template for comparison. In reality, it may prove more astute to swivel our mental map of the Mediterranean when exploring useful parallels for both China and the United States’ respective strategic cultures. Indeed, and as counterintuitive as this could first appear, Carthage, a cosmopolitan, maritime trading state, provides a better tool for comparison with the United States than the continentalist, xenophobic and expansionist Rome of the mid-republic. The latter, meanwhile, may actually bear closer resemblance to today’s China. Like the current leadership in Beijing, Rome’s early rulers were concerned first and foremost with internal consolidation and territorial defence. After having battered their neighbouring Italian peoples into bloody submission and forcibly incorporating them into their Republic, the Romans started to grow concerned over the rise of an alternative power centre on the tip of the peninsula in the form of the powerful city-state of Tarentum. This anxiety hit its crescendo when the inhabitants of Tarentum enrolled a renowned warrior, King Pyrrhus of Epirus, to fight their battles against Rome. This led to the savage Pyrrhic Wars, during which Rome joined hands with the great naval power of its time, Carthage, to protect its sea lines of communication. Once Pyrrhus was defeated, however, and the Roman Republic had freed itself from its existential land-based threat, the budding empire’s political and economic elite started to look askance at signs of growing Punic influence in their maritime backyard.

Carthage’s presence in Sicily and Sardinia, which could potentially be used as staging points for an invasion on Roman soil began to be viewed as a severe strategic liability—something which could only be resolved by Rome’s breaking out into the wider Mediterranean, past the ‘island chain’ of Carthaginian dependencies and protectorates. Carthage, for its part, bore witness to the actions of this rapidly expanding, hyper-nationalistic and increasingly militaristic state on the Italian mainland with growing distaste. There are evident comparisons that can be drawn here – like Rome and Carthage, both China and the United States found reasons to cooperate in the face of a common threat—in their case, the Soviet Union. Once that unifying threat vanished almost overnight, their relationship was suddenly recast in a harsher light, and regional rivalry grew to become one of its defining factors. The tragic result of the growing enmity in-between Rome and Carthage is well known—it erupted into the system-shattering conflicts of the Punic Wars, led to the utter annihilation of a prosperous civilisation, and to the resulting emergence of Rome as the lone superpower in the Mediterranean.
What is interesting, however, is how Rome, a traditionally continentalist power, managed to overcome its maritime adversary, and in so doing, vault its military capacity from land to sea. History tells us that Rome’s shipbuilding technology was far behind that of its Carthaginian rivals, whose Phoenician mariners had been plying the Mediterranean since the Early Bronze Age. Much like today’s China, Rome had little to no experience in naval warfare, and its limited knowledge of naval technology placed it at a severe disadvantage. The Romans responded to this technological inferiority by investing in asymmetric weaponry: their equivalent of the Dong Feng-21D was the corvus, a spiked boarding plank which could impale and immobilise the more rapid Carthaginian vessels. Just as Chinese naval strategic planners hope to employ land tactics to influence events at sea – most notably with shore-based weaponry – Roman generals forced the hapless Carthaginian mariners to play by their continental rules. Once their adversary’s naval assets were immobilised or crippled by corvus strikes, Roman legionaries would swarm aboard and the formerly fluid maritime battlefield would suddenly morph into a more fixed environment of wood and steel. Roman shipwrights also engaged in technology theft, reverse engineering a Carthaginian vessel which had drifted onto their shores. Like China, whose new J-20 stealth fighter is rumoured to incorporate elements of the United States’ F-117 stealth fighter – shot down over former Yugoslavia in 1999 – Rome had no qualms in stealing foreign weapons technology for its own gain. When Rome’s fleets ran the risk of losing a major engagement at sea, its admirals would redirect its naval operations away from blue-water combat, and towards blockading actions of major ports.

Useful insights:

- As James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara have wisely cautioned, it would be foolish to presume that just because China has not known a significant naval past it will not be in measure to become a great seapower. Ancient Rome’s successful bid for seapower during the Punic Wars provides ample demonstration of how geopolitical circumstances can compel seemingly immutable military traditions and organisations to forcefully adapt. And, indeed, after the Punic Wars, Rome gradually rose to become the governing naval power within the Mediterranean, which came under the Empire to be known as Rome’s ‘Mare Nostrum’ – a geopolitical template, which, no doubt, some contemporary Chinese strategists would like to eventually apply to the South China Sea.

- Many of Carthage’s greatest defeats can be attributed to the lack of unity within its armed forces, which were predominantly composed of groups of mercenaries of different origins. If the United States and its allies wish to eventually prevail in a conflict against China, they must work hard towards greater interoperability and clearly define
their prospective warfighting roles. History shows us that without a limpid understand-
ing of each ally’s role in the event of conflict, coalitions may disintegrate when con-
fronted with a determined, unified foe. The debate surrounding Australia’s latest
planned submarine acquisitions provides a case in point: will these submarines serve
solely to defend Australia’s own interests in their near seas, or will their use also be envi-
visioned in joint United States-Australian combat operations in the South China Sea, for
instance?15
2. Post-revolutionary France: the obsession with internal unity and the quest for offensive sea denial

To a Western audience, reports of China’s latest bout of brutal repression of its ethnic and religious minorities in places such as Tibet, Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia are profoundly unsettling. Accustomed to the gentle virtues of modern democracy, citizens of countries such as France or the United States may have temporarily forgotten that the births of their own respective nation states were also protracted, bloody affairs. For instance, France’s past excesses in the name of national unity could serve as an instructive counter-example to a Chinese leadership perennially consumed with insecurity over internal fragmentation.

Today’s France, with its common language and highly centralised government, is a far cry from the France of the pre-revolution. Indeed, the country that existed before the storming of the Bastille more closely resembled a ‘jumble of fiefdoms’ controlled by an overarching, distant monarchy than the highly consolidated nation-state we know today. Less a cultural monolith than a kaleidoscope of different dialects and languages, author Graham Robb describes how up to 1800 only eleven percent of the population spoke what we would now recognise as French. Great swathes of the countryside were inaccessible for state bureaucrats, and in places such as the small province of Brittany, people from one village would frequently refuse to marry people from another—in large part because they often had great difficulty communicating.

France’s post-revolutionary state apparatus, fired by nationalist ardor and consumed with the fear of internal fragmentation (or what Beijing would now lambast as fissiparous tendencies) embarked on a whole-scale ‘internal colonisation process’ which sought to eradicate regional dialects, and stamp out local traditions, which were viewed as potentially reactionary and subversive. Just as young Tibetans are now forced to learn Chinese, young Bretons, Provencaux and Basques were compelled to learn French. More than a simple linguistic unifier, French was considered to be the purest vehicle of revolutionary ideals. In 1794, the Abbot Gregoire introduced his infamous ‘Report on the Necessity and Means of Exterminating Patois [regional dialects] and Universalising the Use of the French Language’. Regional uprisings, such as the Royalist counter-revolution in the coastal province of Vendee, were brutally crushed, and the attachment to local languages and superstitions became associated with counterrevolutionary leanings. Thus, in 1794, Bertrand Barere, an important member of France’s ruling assembly, addressed the question of linguistic diversity by declaring that ‘these barbaric tongues and vulgar idioms are the sure signs of fanatics and counter-revolutionaries’ and adding that ‘federalism and superstition spoke Breton, the hatred of the Republic speaks Germanic, while fanatics speak Basque’.
The tone of this diatribe is almost eerily reminiscent of that of today’s Chinese leadership who portray acts of unrest in Tibet and elsewhere as being engineered by a ‘separatist clique’. Similarly, just as Beijing has sought to solidify its people’s sense of national unity by creating a narrative of victimisation and whipping up jingoistic outrage over ongoing territorial disputes, nineteenth-century France worked hard to redirect the attention of its diversified people towards common external threats, most notably that which it perceived as emanating from Germany on its eastern flank. This enmity culminated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 which led to the bitter humiliation of the battle of Sedan, and to the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.

Throughout much of the century following the revolution – barring, perhaps, the Napoleonic interlude, from 1803 to 1815 – France’s preoccupation with its land borders as well as its obsession with internal unity meant that it struggled to assert itself as a maritime power, despite the existence of a strong naval tradition and savoir-faire. A trio of professors from the United States Naval War College, when comparing France and China, point out that ‘if contentalist powers typically face formidable political, bureaucratic and cultural obstacles to maritime transformation, strong political leadership would seem essential to overcoming them’, before arguing that France’s leadership, traditionally, placed a far greater strategic emphasis on land power. That being said, France, much like China today, displayed an astonishing propensity to respond creatively to its seapower deficit by investing in niche weaponry and developing asymmetric strategies. In the vein of contemporary Chinese strategists, who hope to overwhelm a larger, more powerful American fleet in China’s near seas with swarms of Houbei class catamarans armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, French theorists from the so-called Jeune Ecole advocated the use of small, powerfully-equipped naval assets to counteract the effect of Britain’s much larger fleet. China’s intense focus on submarine warfare also mirrors that of the French, who established the world’s very first submarine branch in 1888, and were pioneers in the development of steam-powered vessels and torpedoes. Unfortunately, a lack of political support, funding and industrial infrastructure meant that despite all these efforts, Paris found itself consistently outproduced and outpaced by shipwrights across the Channel, and had to resign itself to the lasting reality of British naval superiority.

**Useful Insights:**

- Post-Revolutionary France’s draconian policies against linguistic minorities has led to one of Europe’s greatest cultural losses – the almost total disappearance of entire languages and their cultures, from the Occitan of celebrated Medieval Ballads, to the ancient Celtic Breton, now spoken only in minute pockets of Brittany. Despite contempo-
rary France’s efforts to resuscitate regional languages, they have now become something of the past. This formidable cultural loss is something that many now lament. Similarly, China will also come to sorely regret the impoverishment of its own culture incurred by the continued repression of its own ethnic and linguistic minorities. By demonstrating humility and encouraging China not to commit the same errors they have themselves made, Western nations may have more success in reshaping the current Chinese leadership’s parochial world view – which often seems more befitting of an insecure nineteenth-century nation than of a contemporary aspiring great power. This is reflected in the fact that Beijing now spends more per year on internal security than on defence. In the future, China’s overriding fear of centrifugal dislocation could act as a dampener on its appetite for external power projection, and hence for naval expansion.

On another level, France’s former incapacity to emerge as a naval peer competitor to the United Kingdom demonstrates the potential utility of a diversionary grand strategy to ‘drag China back to shore’. If China continues to engage in aggressive maritime expansionism, it may prove necessary to reawaken its continental demons by enhancing American military presence in places such as Central Asia, continental South-East Asia, and Mongolia. Just as France’s leadership proved incapable of understanding the true virtues of seapower due to its fixation on the French-German border, Beijing’s current naval trajectory could be interrupted, or stalled, by the emergence of a revived threat along its land borders. This could also be accomplished via proxy, with the United States discreetly assisting India in the strengthening of its position along the long disputed Sino-Indian border, or by providing Vietnam’s large land army with modernised equipment. This could potentially encourage the fomentation of bureaucratic divisions within China’s armed forces by divesting the navy of some of its rationale for expansion, and adding grist to the Army’s desire to maintain its traditional inter-service preeminence.

If China’s military is becoming more influential, as some have recently argued, then it makes eminent sense to discreetly chip away at its organisational unity by adding a greater measure of diversity – and hence of confusion-to its long-term strategic aims.
3. Petrine Russia: a Eurasian power’s ephemeral tryst with navalism

The Tsar, Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1682 to his death in 1725, is recognised as one of Russia's most visionary rulers. Credited with having pivoted the formerly autarkic land-locked nation towards Europe and mercantilism, Peter the Great is also viewed as the founder of the Russian Navy. A sort of Deng Xiaoping and Admiral Liu Huaqing rolled into one, the Romanov ruler ushered in the so-called ‘Petrine’ golden age, a period of economic prosperity and revitalised Russian influence on the world stage. Eager to capitalise on an upsurge in seaborne trade with Northern Europe and Persia, he quickly understood how the sustainability of the new-found wealth flowing from seaborne trade hinged upon the shielding presence of a blue-water fleet.

Before Peter the Great’s coronation, Russia’s martial history had largely been defined by its people’s struggle to hold sway over the rimy, sprawling territories of the northern Eurasian land mass. The nation’s ill-defined geographical boundaries in Central Asia bred a constant feel of continental insecurity, which was seared into the national psyche after the devastating Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, and a long, woeful, series of successive calamities and depredations. Russia’s vastness, combined with its historical susceptibility to nomadic invasions, is something which the country had in common with Imperial China, along with the underlying conviction that when confronted with such a wide panoply of diffuse threats, autocracy may form the only practical method of governance. Much like Imperial China, pre-Petrine Russia’s economy was largely self-contained, and its geography, covered with meandering waterways, allowed it to develop traditions of ship-building and riverine transport without really taking to sea.

Peter the Great opted to break with this long tradition of strategic isolation by taking a decisive turn towards the wide open waters. He founded a new city, Saint Petersburg, at the end of the Gulf of Finland on the Baltic Sea, and decided to make it his capital. The centre of political power thus shifted from the more sedate, land-locked city of Moscow to a bustling maritime trade hub which hummed and thrived with energy. Described as Russia’s new ‘window onto Europe’, Saint Petersburg also provided its feverishly ambitious ruler with the perfect staging point for his plans of naval expansion into the Baltic Sea. This rapidly led Russia into conflict with the local maritime power, Sweden, and Russian galleys were soon to be seen ravaging coastal villages and burghs along the Nordic nation’s long coastline. Peter the Great’s sudden spurt of naval bellicosity, which suddenly propelled Russia from the periphery of European geopolitics into its very centre, began to foster unease in the wider maritime neighbourhood. The United Kingdom, the traditional offshore balancer in the region, grew increasingly alarmed, and this despite the fact that its king, George III, had previously humoured Peter the Great’s desires for maritime
expansion. Russia’s tryst with seapower, however, was to prove remarkably short-lived. Peter the Great’s successors did not seem to share his dreams of a great Russian Armada, viewing it as prohibitively costly, and preferring to focus, once more, on continental campaigns. Thus, Russia’s conflicts with Turkey in the immediate aftermath of Peter the Great’s death were fought on land, not at sea, and until the twilight of the Imperial Period the Russian Navy was almost systematically overlooked in favour of the army.

**Useful Insights:**

- Like present day China, Russia’s naval expansion under Peter the Great cannot be divorced from its shift away from land-locked autarky towards seaborne mercantilism. As long as China’s economy continues to rely very heavily on seaborne trade, and more specifically on seaborne imports, one should not be surprised to see its navy grow in size and clout. As great maritime theorists such as Sir Julian Corbett have so clearly articulated, the rise and fall of a country’s navy is often intricately linked to its growing centrality within the global trading system-and the oceans continue to form the world’s greatest arteries of commerce.

- Just as Peter the Great’s naval expansion into the Baltic caused concern in George III’s United Kingdom, China’s maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea is prompting a strengthening of countervailing maritime coalitions. This is a natural, and time old, balancing process.

- On the other hand, a very strong continental bias continues to permeate China’s strategic thinking. Historian and sinologist Hugh Clark recounts how throughout history, China’s leadership viewed the sea as a necessary sanitising divide in-between the Middle Kingdom and the more inchoate, dangerous, forces lying beyond the reach of China’s civilising mission. ‘Unlike continental frontiers, along which culture elides into another through a cultural transition across space’, he adds, ‘the maritime frontier functioned as an interface’ – and therefore as a potential gateway to renewed strategic vulnerability. Depending on how firmly entrenched this mindset is amongst China’s key decision-makers, this could affect the rising nation’s order of priorities. As Russia demonstrated in the aftermath of Peter the Great’s rule, a country’s maritime rise is not necessarily linear, nor is it preordained. Just as Russia’s rulers started to question the expenses linked to maintaining a large ocean-going fleet, China’s Ming rulers also preferred, ultimately, to eschew costly maritime expansion by putting an end to the maritime expansion parenthetically pursued under the famed Admiral Zheng He. In a similar fashion, Beijing’s oligarchy may be inclined to opt for alternative, cost-effective strategies to the formation of new grand armada. One such strategy is arguably already being pursued under the ae-
gis of China's so-called 'access diplomacy', under which Chinese engineers develop infra-
structure along the Eurasian landmass to bypass vulnerable sea lanes and
choke-points. The growing weight of the Second Artillery and of its shore-based missile
weaponry in the Chinese military's tactical calculus also raises the question of whether
Beijing may choose, in the future, to protect its maritime trade under an anti-access and
area-denial dome projected outwards from the shore, rather than via flotillas of expen-
sive – and potentially vulnerable-aircraft carriers and destroyers.
4. Conclusion

At a time when the world’s strategic map is taking on increasingly maritime hues, the European Union can ill afford to withdraw into its continental shell, and find itself reduced to the rank of passive bystander in an Indo-Pacific century. After all, it is Europe’s variegated history which provides the richest inventory of parallels key to understanding the complex and disruptive nature of China’s naval rise. The precipitous decline of European seapower will inevitably be accompanied by a slow withering of European naval thinking, and by a creeping amnesia in all matters maritime. More specifically, the current wave of budget cuts affecting some of Europe’s greatest navies is cause for concern. For centuries, the continent’s ships have plied the waves, providing their respective nation-states with the means to protect their trade routes, achieve forward presence, and uphold the so-called ‘silent principles of national security’ on which so much of our current global order currently rests. As the United States Navy stagnates in numerical terms, and the Chinese Navy continues its inexorable ascent, the slow haemorrhage of Western maritime strength risks having a deleterious effect on global stability. If nothing is done to prevent European navies from becoming the sacrificial cows of austerity, the United States may well find itself crippled not only in the checking – but also in the understanding – of Beijing’s quest for seapower.

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Notes


7 See, for example: Cullen Murphy, Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Miffler Harcourt, 2007), pp. 272.


9 For example, from 1979 until the end of the Cold War, the United States and China cooperated in the field of signals intelligence, with the United States monitoring Soviet Russia’s missile tests from secret facilities located in Western Xinjiang. See: Bill Geerz, ‘Inside the Ring: US-China Joint Spying’, The Washington Times, 26th November 2009.

10 For a compelling account of Carthage’s long and tragic history, see: Richard Miles, Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

11 The Dong-Feng 21D is a two-stage, solid-propellant, single-warhead medium-range ballistic missile with a reported range of up to 1,700 nautical miles. This missile has been perceived as a potential major challenge to United States’ naval supremacy in the region, by virtue of its status as the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missile. In 2010, the commander-in-chief of Pacific Command, Admiral Willard, stated that the missile had reached initial operating capability. It remains uncertain, however, whether the missile – which has not yet been tested over water – would be capable of successfully hitting a moving target at sea.


Chris Buckley, ‘China domestic security spending rises to $111 billion’, *Reuters*, 5th March 2011.

This idea-of intelligently shaping a prospective adversary’s decisions through long-term planning-takes root in the competitive strategies approach first conceptualised by Andrew W. Marshall at the Department of Defence’s Office of Net Assessment during the Cold War. For a particularly insightful analysis of how this approach can be harnessed to develop a successful United States grand strategy in Asia see: James P. Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, ‘Developing a Strategy for Long-Term Sino-American Competition’, in Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History and Practice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp.257-274.


Commonly known as ‘the father of the modern Chinese Navy’, the late General Liu Huaqing was the commander of the People’s Liberation Army Navy during the 1980s. He is credited with having led the first efforts to transform the Chinese Navy from a coastal defence force into a blue-water navy.


33 The Royal Navy, for example, will find itself bereft of an aircraft carrier strike group until at least 2020. Moreover, the British government has now decided to forgo the expenses of installing Catapult Assisted Take Off Barrier Arrested Recovery systems on the carriers. This means that the carriers will be incapable of operating a wide variety of more heavily armed and long-legged fighter jets, and will have difficulty fielding most future unmanned systems. See: Lee Willet, 'Impact of the F-35B Decision: Time Now to Have Two Ships, Not One', RUSI Analysis, London: Royal United Services Institute, 11th May 2012.

34 The United States Navy numbers about 280 ships today, in comparison to the peak of 597 reached during the Ronald Reagan era.