

Nilufar Gadimalieva

Baku State University

Master's student

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5883-0831>

qadimalinilufar@gmail.com

Alfred Thayer Mahan And The Atlanticist Reinterpretation Of Anglo-American Relations

Abstract

This article examines Alfred Thayer Mahan's contribution to late 19th-early 20th-century American historiography and his role in the reconfiguration of Anglo-American relations. Although most scholarship portrays Mahan primarily as a naval strategist, the present study highlights his deeper impact as a historiographical revisionist and ideological thinker. It argues that Mahan's seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890), contributed to a significant paradigm shift in American strategic thought by transforming the traditional image of Britain as a colonial oppressor into a model of maritime partnership.

This study examines Mahan's ideological construction of «Anglo-Saxonism», and explores how the author chose instead to use shared language, legal traditions, and cultural heritage to help the United States and Britain transcend their historical antagonisms from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Instead of viewing the Royal Navy as a colonial danger, Mahan presented it as the ultimate shield for world trade and shipping. It was shift in perception that helped cement the ideas behind the «Great Rapprochement». Additionally, this analysis extends to evaluating the reception of his strategic concepts among the American politicians, such as Roosevelt and Lodge, while simultaneously assessing their validation by British naval and scholarly communities. The final conclusion reached in this article is that not only did Mahan's historiographical undertaking have an impact on naval doctrine, but that it also helped to shape U.S. Foreign Policy, creating a solidly established, permanent Atlanticist foundation. Elements of this vision later found expression in the twentieth-century "Special Relationship" and modern transatlantic security structures such as NATO and AUKUS.

Keywords: *Alfred Thayer Mahan, Sea Power, US Historiography, Anglo-American Relations, Atlanticism, Geopolitics, Anglo-Saxonism, Strategy Identity, Great Rapprochement, Naval Doctrine.*

Nilufər Qədiməliyeva

Bakı Dövlət Universiteti

Magistr

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5883-0831>

qadimalinilufar@gmail.com

Alfred Tayer Mahan və Anqlo-Amerika münasibətlərinin Atlantizm kontekstində yenidən şərh

Xülasə

Bu məqalə XIX əsrin sonu-XX əsrin əvvəllərində ABŞ tarixşünaslığında Alfred Tayer Mahanın rolunu və onun İngiltərə-Amerika münasibətlərinin yenidən qurulmasına təsirini təhlil edir. Mövcud tədqiqatlarda Mahan əsasən hərbi-dəniz strateqi kimi qəbul edilsə də, bu araşdırma onun tarixşünas-reviziyaçı və ideoloji düşünər kimi dərin intellektual təsirini ön plana çıxarır. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, Mahanın fundamental əsəri “Dəniz gücünün tarixə təsiri, 1660-1783” Amerikan strateji təfəkküründə

əhəmiyyətli paradigmə dəyişikliyi yaradaraq, Britaniya imperiyasına dair ənənəvi “kolonial zülmkar” obrazını “dəniz tərəfdaşı” modeli ilə əvəz etmişdir.

Məqələdə Mahanın “Anqlosaksonizm” ideoloji konstruksiyası dərinlən arasdırır və sübut edilir ki, o, 1776 və 1812-ci illər müharibələrindən qalan tarixi düşmənçiliyi aradan qaldırmaq üçün ortaq dil, hüquq sistemi və mədəni irsə əsaslanmışdır. Britaniya Kral Donanmasını kolonial təhlükə deyil, qlobal ticarət və dəniz yollarının universal qaranlı kimi təqdim etməklə Mahan “Böyük Yaxınlaşma” (Great Rapprochement) üçün zəruri intellektual zəmin yaratmışdır. Arasdırmada həmçinin Mahanın ideyalarının Teodor Ruzvelt və Henri Kabot Lodj kimi siyasi elitaya təsiri, eləcə də Britaniya akademik və hərbi dairələrində qəbulu təhlil olunur. Nəticədə qeyd edilir ki, Mahanın tarixşünaslıq layihəsi yalnız dəniz doktrinasına təsir etməklə məhdudlaşmamış, ABŞ xarici siyasətini daimi Atlantizm istiqamətinə yönəlmişdir. Bu isə sonralar “Xüsusi Münasibətlər” (Special Relationship), NATO və AUKUS kimi transatlantik təhlükəsizlik arxitekturalarının ideoloji öncüllərindən biri kimi qiymətləndirilə bilər.

Açar sözlər: Alfred Tayer Mahan, Dəniz gücü, ABŞ tarixşünaslığı, İngiltərə-Amerika münasibətləri, Atlantizm, Geopolitika, Anqlosaksonizm, Strateji identiklik, Böyük yaxınlaşma, Dəniz doktrinası.

Introduction

The United States and Great Britain were rivals, not partners, until the final decades of nineteenth century. American political culture and historical memory remained deeply influenced by legacy of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, both of which reinforced an enduring image of Britain as a former imperial oppressor and strategic competitor (Allen, 1954). This antagonistic image was further strengthened during the American Civil War, when British political and economic circles openly sympathized with the Confederacy. As a result, throughout much of the nineteenth century, public discourse, historical writing and strategic thinking in the United States treated Great Britain primarily as an adversary whose global naval dominance posed a long-term threat to American sovereignty and expansion (Perkins, 1968).

In this context, Mahan's intellectual intervention was a remarkable historical and historiographical pivot. Mahan was an officer by profession, but not only a partitioner of naval strategy, for the intellectual made high-profile contributions as well and laid down an expansive interpretive framework that transformed the historical record on the two powers (Sumida, 1997).

And therein lies the central question, how did a naval strategist writing within a framework of maritime strategy in theory succeed in shifting over a century narrative that had an antagonistic character into one with strategic affinity. Mahan's historical and theoretical works on sea power are the object of this research, while its subject is their ideological and historiographical significance beyond the framework of the strictly military doctrine (Hattendorf, 1991).

The intellectual void was filled by Alfred Thayer Mahan's work. Mahan didn't merely call for a stronger navy; he gave them a new history that identified the United States and Great Britain not as opponents but as partners in shared maritime destiny. His landmark work «The Influence of Sea Power Upon History (1890), came at a pivotal moment, offering intellectual scaffolding for an emerging Atlanticist identity. Through a reimagining of the oceans not as barriers to separation, but rather «great highways» for communication, Mahan fundamentally transformed the Atlantic how one viewed the Atlantic from an area of contention into a zone of cooperation. This study explores how Mahan's theories facilitated the strategic convergence of Anglo-Saxon powers, transforming the North Atlantic geopolitical landscape.

Research

Mahan's contribution to the Atlanticist reorientation of U.S. foreign policy was rooted in his deterministic view of the history. He believed a nation's survival and prosperity depend on its sea control. What made his approach unique was that, instead of viewing the British as an old foe to be subdued, he saw them as the exemplary model that the United States should emulate. Mahan Believed that the British Empire's success was founded on an uninterrupted national policy of securing

maritime commerce through a powerful navy, and he insisted that the United States should follow the same pattern if it ever wished to become a great power (Mahan, 1890).

This strategy, beyond military logic, had profound ideological implications under the rubric of «Anglo-Saxon solidarity». Like many of his contemporaries, Mahan was influenced by the Social Darwinist ideas that the world is a theater of racial competition. For Mahan, «Anglo-Saxon» or «Teutonic» peoples were fated to lead world civilization. A war between the U.S. and Britain would be a «civil war» that would diminish their combined racial power. In this respect, as in «The United States Looking Outward», he downplays the importance of conflicts and emphasizes shared culture and history. (Turk, 1987; Anderson, 1981). Simultaneously, this ideology reflected the exclusionary and supremacist undertones characteristic of the contemporary imperialist discourse. This racial lens turned a diplomatic alliance into something that felt like a natural necessity, through it also carried the supremacist and imperialist tones common to that era.

This theory became significant in its practical application when the Venezuelan Boundary Dispute of 1895 arose. Whereas the U.S. government, led by Secretary of State Richard Olney, took a strong stance. But Mahan's advice was more nuanced. He understood, that the U.S. needed to show its power in the Western Hemisphere, but he also knew that a war with Britain would be disastrous for the whole world, affecting trade and stability. Likely, the crisis was decisive in establishing that these two nations could negotiate rather than fight, and reaffirmed their communal interest in the Atlantic order (Campbell, 1960).

Mahan's conception of the isthmian (the prospective Panama Canal) route contributed to the strengthening of the Atlanticist interest. He speculated the canal would fundamentally change the world's strategic map, turning the United States into two-ocean power but one with new vulnerabilities. Mahan theorized that the U.S. would need a greatly enlarged fleet to defend both its coasts and the canal. The British linkup rested on a strategic foundation. Britain, have become overstretched by the emergent German High Seas Fleet, by the end of nineteenth century. Mahan's reasoning called for a natural division of labor: Britain would acquiesce to U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere by withdrawing its fleet from the Western Atlantic. This practical compromise is indicative of both shared leadership, and well-defined spheres of influence (Friedberg, 1988).

Mahan was influential all the way to the top of the British establishment. It was the study of the Royal Navy and was read by statesmen who found in Mahan confirmation of their own «Blue Water» policies. The British media and intellectual class found Mahan to be its own «American apostle of the Sea Power» and seized upon his ideas to push for closer relations with the United States. This mutual admiration produced a feedback effect: as American elites saw their strategic ambitions confirmed by preeminent power in the world, they felt emboldened to increasingly align their interests with those of Britain's interest (Hobsbawm, 1987).

The apogee of this Mahanian transformation was the 1898 Spanish-American War. Mahan had long foretold U.S. expansion into the Pacific. The war was the first operational trial for the «New Navy» which Mahan had advocated. Great Britain in particular pursued its own policy of benevolence by the rest of Europe during the war. This unarticulated support was as if to say, «Indeed, these two maritime democracies do in fact share a common destiny». The acquisition of the Philippines and Puerto Rico compelled the U.S. to look outside its own borders and permanently abandon its continental perspective. The United States, had «grown up» and in growing up Mahan meant take its place beside Great Britain in safeguarding the sea-lanes (Zakaria, 1998).

Mahan's ideas struck a chord with the American elite, especially with Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge. Roosevelt, who regularly read Mahan's works, corresponded with him and followed similar navalist ideas during his time of Assistant Secretary of the Navy and later as avid reader of Mahan, maintained correspondence with him and applied similar navalist principles during his tenure as Assistant Secretary of the Navy and later as President. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge used Mahan's arguments about geopolitics to support the «Large Policy» of expansionism and a shipbuilding program. Even though Roosevelt had already formed strong opinions about sea power in the 1880s, the connection with Mahan helped him turn these ideas into laws and executive actions, plus making the U.S. government more Atlantic-oriented (McCranie, 2021).

Mahan's Atlanticism was not just about keeping the peace, but it was about the joint control of the global commons. He anticipated the idea of the «Special Relationship» by many years. To him, the Pax Britannica was turning into a Pax Anglo-Americana. He cautioned that if the U.S. did not take hold of its maritime future, the powers from the continent such as Germany or Russia would step in. Therefore, Atlanticism was also a way to protect the existing order against the rising land powers. This foresaw the geopolitical situation of the World Wars and the Cold War, in which the «bridge» across the Atlantic was the main turning point of the world order (Kaplan, 2017; Lambert, 2018).

Conclusion

The historiographical re-evaluation of Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings shows a major change from military viewpoints to larger geopolitical and ideological ones. This work, looking at Atlanticism, that portrays Mahan as a key founder of transatlantic unity, whereas before he was seen only as a naval strategist. Changing the image of Great Britain from a colonial oppressor to a crucial partner in a shared maritime strategy. Mahan brought about a «Copernican revolution» in the way the United States thought about strategy. By doing this, he not only covered up the story of historical grievances but also promoted the ideology of Anglo-Saxon solidarity, which was the intellectual glue for the «Great Rapprochement».

More significantly, Mahan showed that these ideas are not shadows of power politics but rather dynamic forces of historical transformation. His capacity to formulate his ideas in the language of what would become the dominant political culture and to persuade elites made the Author's vision of an Atlanticist partnership was achievable, enabled it to move from the pages of books to center stage in global politics. Mahan schooled a nation that had previously been insular in its outlook to knowing that its own security was bound up with the open sea and the viability of its transatlantic partner.

Mahan's clear sightedness laid the ideological foundation of the modern transatlantic order. The ideas of the «Special Relationship», NATO, and AUKUS are the material embodiments of the Mahanian vision that the Atlantic is a bridge connecting two like-minded powers rather than a boundary dividing them. His influence is still felt in framework of Western security, and his examples shows us that the reworking of a nation's history can be the most effective instrument in determining its future.

References

1. Allen, H. C. (1954). *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1952*. London: Odhams Press.
2. Anderson, Stuart. (1981). *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
3. Campbell, Charles S. (1960). *Anglo-American Understanding, 1898-1903*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
4. Friedberg, Aaron L. (1988). *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
5. Hattendorf, John B. (Ed.). (1991). *Mahan on Naval Strategy: Selection from the Writings of Real Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.
6. Hobsbawm, E. (1987). *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*. London: Weidenfeld&Nicolson.
7. Kaplan, R.D. (2017). *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Random House.
8. Lambert, A. (2018). *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
9. Mahan, Alfred Thayer. (1890). *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
10. Mahan, Alfred Thayer. (1890). "The United States Looking Outward." *The Atlantic Monthly* 66 (December): 816-824.

11. McCranie, Kevin D. (2021). Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.
13. Perkins, Bradford. (1968). The Great Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1895-1914. New York: Atheneum.
14. Sumida, Jon Tetsuro. (1997). Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
15. Turk, Richard W. (1987). The Ambiguous Relationship: Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan. New York: Greenwood Press.
16. Zakaria, Fareed. (1998). From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.