Sebastian H. Lukasik
The Great White Fleet: Reassessing America’s Rise to Power

Over a century separates the voyage of the Great White Fleet in 1907 - 1909 from Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta’s unveiling of a new strategic vision of national defense that is to shape America’s defense policy in the near future. Historians have long interpreted the former as an iconic manifestation of the moment when the United States symbolically announced its capability and intention of asserting itself as a world power. Scholars may well come to identify the latter event as the historical moment when the United States began its retreat from greatness against the background of worries and concerns that, in the past, have rarely mattered to Americans: a recognition of financial and economic limits, fears about loss of competitiveness in relation to other, more vibrant societies, and attendant predictions of America’s national decline.¹ Both events, however, are connected by a common thread. Collectively, they illustrate the role that factors other than sound assessments of America’s national interest have played in forming long-lasting strategic outlooks.

Canonical interpretations of America’s emergence as a great power frequently identify the round-the-world voyage of the so-called “Great White Fleet” between 1907 and 1909 as a critical milestone on the road that would ultimately lead the United States to the status of a global superpower by the middle of twentieth century. Dispatched on their landmark cruise by President Theodore Roosevelt, the combined battleship squadrons of the U.S. Navy sought to demonstrate to the rest of the world America’s growing power-projection capabilities, defuse lingering diplomatic tensions with Imperial Japan, promote strategic partnerships with other nations, impress America’s likely allies and opponents, and test the technical and tactical proficiency of the Navy’s capital ships.² Hailed by contemporary observers and historians alike as one of the

crowning achievements of the Roosevelt presidency, the voyage of the Great White Fleet remains a quintessential example of Roosevelt’s proverbial ability to “speak softly” while wielding a “big stick” - in other words, to advance America’s strategic goals through the prominent advertisement of America’s latent military and industrial might, rather than through the actual use of force.³ In its capacity as an instrument of “soft power” deployed in pursuit of an assertive foreign policy, the Great White Fleet remains a compelling metaphor symbolizing some of the themes that would come to dominate the “making of strategy” in the United States for much of the following century.

That the Great White Fleet reflects a number of broader themes dominant in America’s historical experience in the making and the implementation of strategy is beyond doubt. But the traditional interpretation of the voyage as an unalloyed strategic and foreign policy triumph is much more difficult to sustain. Over a hundred years after the leading elements of the fleet left Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the voyage remains a symbol of America’s approach to grand strategy - but not in the way portrayed that the dominant, laudatory interpretations of its significance tend to emphasize. Far from laying the foundations for America’s great power status, the Great White Fleet represented fundamental flaws in the ability of the United States to formulate and implement a sustained, long-term strategic vision that might serve as the framework for foreign policy decisions. Intended primarily for domestic consumption, the voyage functioned first and foremost as a magnificent piece of political theater that masked America’s strategic weakness in the Pacific, occluded critical shortcomings and flaws in the very power-projection capabilities that the voyage was supposed to tout.⁴

Above all, the highly publicized voyage disguised the lack of direction that had had come to characterize America’s grand strategic vision since the Spanish-America and Philippine Wars less than a decade earlier. Until the outbreak of those two conflicts,


⁴ Brand, T. R., ch. 23.
the twin imperatives of the Monroe Doctrine and the “Open Door” policy provided a clear, if broad, framework for America’s grand strategic outlook. The United States’ sudden transition, between 1898 and 1902, into a *de facto* imperial power with colonial holdings scattered from the western Pacific to the Caribbean added a new layer of complexity to the nation’s foreign policy by compelling America’s political leaders and military planners to confront a new - and at times bewildering - array of overseas commitments, threats, and contingencies. Few of these could be profitably analyzed through the prism of the venerable policy traditions of excluding foreign powers from the Western Hemisphere and keeping China open to free trade. Among the foremost of these challenges was the emergence in the Asia-Pacific region of an assertive regional power - Imperial Japan - whose ambitions, many American politicians, diplomats, soldiers, and sailors believed, set it on a collision course with America’s interests in the same part of the world.

The search for a new strategic framework that would reflect the new realities of America’s international position would prove frustrating until the era of the two world wars, when the imperative of preventing any one power from dominating the Eurasian landmass would emerge as a bedrock of American global strategy in the first half of the twentieth century, before metamorphosing into the policy of containment of Cold War-era fame. But until the United States became a European power by virtue of its intervention in the First World War in 1917, efforts to formulate an intellectual scaffolding that would reflect America’s new strategic realities, and provide the basis of practical planning and implementation of policy. Instead, strategic thought and practice in the years 1902 - 1917 came to revolve around a series of high-profile initiatives of the kind embodied by the Great White Fleet: dramatic, low-intensity foreign interventions coupled with displays of technical and tactical virtuosity that for all intents and purposes subordinated grand strategy to the capabilities of the military services and weapon systems - especially the U.S. Navy and vessels - tasked with projecting American power

---


6 Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, chaps. 8 - 9.
abroad. Viewed in this light, the Great White Fleet becomes the ultimate embodiment of these trends: a much-advertised public relations stunt whose spectacular nature, with its emphasis on showcasing the capabilities of weapon systems, diverted attention from the inability of American policymakers to develop a new strategic framework appropriate for the realities of the world in which they operated.

But the Great White Fleet is more than simply an intriguing episode in the history of American defense policy and foreign relations. At the outset of the twenty-first century, the broad contextual frameworks that served as the backdrop for the Fleet’s world cruise cannot but appear eerily familiar to American policymakers. Once again, American defense planners and strategic-level policymakers must struggle with articulating and implementing a grand strategic vision that reflects the realities of highly complex international environment. As had been the case a hundred years ago, the strategic frameworks that had shaped American national security for decades past have lost much of their relevance in light of the fundamental changes that have been reshaping international relations since the end of the Cold War. And in yet another parallel to the historical setting of the Great White Fleet, American policymakers are increasingly seeking to convince themselves - as well as the American public - that the Western Pacific and East Asia represent the basic point of departure for any attempt to formulate a grand strategy for the United States in the twenty-first century. The extent to which the United States’ national security apparatus has been successful with generating a new strategic vision to accommodate these new realities is questionable.

Such contextual analogies are neither coincidental, nor simply a matter of purely antiquarian interest. They reveal deeply-rooted continuities in the “American way” of the making of strategy - in other words, in the processes that underpin the efforts of a state to “evolve sensible and realistic approaches to the strategic problems that confront it.” More to the point, these commonalities underscore the reasons behind the difficulties that American political and military leaders have consistently experienced in their efforts to construct new strategic frameworks to replace time-honored constructs that have been rendered obsolescent or even obsolete as a consequence of profound

---

changes in the international system and in America’s place within it. These limiting factors figured prominently in the strategy-making process that served as the backdrop for America’s first tentative steps toward great-power status in the decade that witnessed the cruise of the Great White Fleet. They exercise a correspondingly undue influence on those grappling with the making of national strategy today, at a time when, according to the more pessimistic assessments, the United States is about to enter on the path of relative decline as a world power vis-a-vis a number of newly emerging “peer competitors” such as China and India. For this reason, they merit closer examination as indicators of the extent to which the strategy-making process cannot be reduced to a rational and pragmatic calculus of national interest and power.

The first of these context is that of technology. To paraphrase a seminal analysis of the impact of technology on American approaches to strategy, the global prominence of the United States is the product of America’s ability to innovate and master complex technologies, and deploy them in pursuit of the national interest. While Americans themselves frequently emphasize the attractiveness of their political culture and universal ideals as the basis of their country’s international stature, the rest of world has consistently evidenced far more interest in, and respect for, American technology than American ideas. The influence of technology on strategy has not been consistently beneficial, however. The Great White Fleet is the perfect example. The official public affairs effort that accompanied the fleet’s progress around the world routinely stressed its technical and tactical capabilities as an end in itself, a tendency that conflated the fleet’s contribution to the “the perfection of technique” in naval warfare and power-projection procedures with national strategy. What today would be termed tactical- ad operational-level technical virtuosity masqueraded as a strategic vision while diverting

---


10 For the concept of the “perfection of technique” as an end in itself in military organizations, see Michael Sherry, Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989).
attention from the hollowness of the strategic conception that underpinned the fleet’s voyage.

Over a hundred years later, America’s obsession with technological capabilities may be exercising as significant - and problematic - an influence over strategy as had been the case during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. The so-called “AirSea Battle,” the military element of the new analytical construct that seeks to re-orient America’s strategic focus toward the Western Pacific and East Asia, prominently highlights the necessity of leveraging American technology as a means of overcoming the threat that a new generation of “access-denying” weapon systems presents to U.S. naval and air units in regions critical to America’s national interests. The details of AirSea Battle remain cloaked in the mantle of secrecy, while official pronouncements insist that this “operational concept” is not directed against any specific potential adversary. Yet, unclassified details available in the public domain leave little room to doubt that the assumptions behind AirSea Battle cannot be separated from American leaders’ growing anxieties about China’s international ambitions and growing military and naval capabilities.11

This raises a fundamental question: what accounts for the “turn to East Asia” that the makers of American strategy have recently stressed? Is that turn the based on a sound assessment of national interest? Or is it instead rooted in the weapon systems and capabilities that loom so large in the procurement strategies and institutional identities espoused by America’s two “strategic” armed services, the Air Force and the Navy? Both services have traditionally privileged platforms, systems, and “ways of war” whose relevance is predicated on the assumption that there can be no greater threat to American national security than “peer opponents” possessed of powerful militaries whose force structure is geared toward fighting large-scale conventional conflicts against their own “mirror-image.”12 In similar fashion, America’s turn toward the Pacific


in the early years of the twentieth century, along with the tendency to identify Japan as a clear and present danger to America’s strategic position in the region, coincided with a pronounced transformation in the strategic outlook of the United States military. Until the war with Spain, the U. S. Army envisioned its mission in terms of performing constabulary and nation-building duties on the Western Frontier, and defending the coasts - in particular the Eastern Seaboard and the Gulf of Mexico - from foreign invasion. Likewise, the U. S. Navy functioned as the country’s first line of defense, while protecting American merchant shipping and safeguarding American economic and commercial interests around the world.13 These basic roles underwent a profound change after the Spanish-American War. The services reinvented themselves into military organizations whose force structure, doctrinal posture, procurement mechanism, and strategic orientation henceforth reflect the belief in the necessity of preparing and training for large-scale conventional war against a Great Power opponent.14 One of the most prominent practical expressions of this institutional mindset was the growing emphasis, beginning in the early 1900s, on planning for a war with Japan as expressed in the first of many incarnations of “War Plan Orange” - decades before Japan aggressively embraced policies that would justify predictions of conflict between the two countries.15

The second context revolves around the relationship between grand strategy and domestic political influences. George F. Kennan, the architect of what would become the Cold War-era strategic construct of containment, routinely argued that the United States could never have a proper grand strategy, because its foreign policy, instead of being


solidly grounded in dispassionate assessments of the national interest, was merely a reflection of internal partisan debates projected onto the international stage.\textsuperscript{16} While it is possible to criticize Kennan’s assessment as an oversimplification, few foreign policy or strategic initiatives of the last one hundred years may be understood in isolation from the domestic audiences for whose consumption they are frequently intended. There is no doubt that a coherent national strategy must take into account considerations of domestic politics and public opinion. But what happens when such considerations serve as the prime mover of strategic-level decisions?

If the example of the circumstances that surrounded the voyage of the Great White Fleet is any indication, the answer to that question must be sought in the perpetual balancing act that strategic-level decision-makers must strike between relatively narrow, short-range issues that preoccupy domestic public opinion on the one hand, and broader, long-term imperatives that a viable strategy must attempt to address. The emergence, in the early 1900s, of the perception that Japan represented an existential threat to American ambitions in the Pacific Basin coincided with a parallel development. This consisted of the rising wave of anti-Japanese - indeed, generally anti-Asian - sentiment in the United States, a trend exemplified by the wave of anti-Japanese hysteria that both provoked and was in turn fanned by, the San Francisco school segregation crisis in 1906 - 1907.\textsuperscript{17} Irrespective of the attempts of the Roosevelt Administration and its historians to depict the Great White Fleet as part of a long-term strategic vision, the genesis of its famous cruise was to be found primarily in Roosevelt’s determination to solve an immediate domestic problem - how to persuade the California legislature to desist from passing discriminatory immigration legislation that might potentially provoke tensions between the United States and Japan. A goodwill naval cruise that focused on the Pacific - and would prominently include a visit to Japan as one of its highlights - would create, domestically, an impression of resolve in Roosevelt’s part, while internationally, it would affirm that in defusing the crisis, Roosevelt was


\textsuperscript{17} Charles E. Neu, \textit{The Troubled Encounter: The United States and Japan} (New York: Krieger, 1979).
acting from a position of strength rather than weakness.\textsuperscript{18} This was fancy footwork, to be sure, yet a far cry from a long-term strategic conception based on rational calculation of the national interest.

The newest incarnation of America’s national strategy, with its emphasis on East Asia, the Western Pacific, and China lend themselves to examination in the same light. It is no secret that that strategy has been shaped by domestic considerations. A new emphasis on fiscal restraint and economies in defense spending; a profound public distaste for the kind of “small wars” that the United States has been conducting for the better part of the last decade in Afghanistan and Iraq; increasing frequency of the rhetoric of “American decline” in public dialogue - all of these factors have clearly exercised an influence over the latest articulation of America’s strategic vision. But has their influence been matched by a sober assessment of whether the strategic focus on East Asia in general and on China in general is in keeping with the the requirements of national interest?

The third, and final context of strategic continuity that links the Great White Fleet with present-day strategic issues concerns the role that Americans’ cultural perceptions of real and potential adversaries play in shaping the outlines of national strategy. As a number of historians have pointed out, American’s international outlook has always been influenced to a lesser or greater extent, by assumptions about the ideological, cultural, and ethnic traits of the non-American “Other” that helped to justify policies that might not otherwise lend themselves to rational assessments. This has been true, in particular, of America’s long and complex history of relations with Asia and its people - relations that for a long time were molded by a set of widely-shared assumptions espoused by educated Americans about “inscrutable,” “perfidious,” or “sneaky” Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese. This emphasis on ideological, cultural, or racial differences, in turn, has often generated the conviction in the inevitability of conflict between the United States and other societies. Such predictions would frequently become self-fulfilling prophecies, providing the foundation for strategies and courses of action that only sharpened the sense of inevitability of clashes between the United States and its perceived international rivals. The rivalry that ultimately led to

\textsuperscript{18} Herring, \textit{From Colony to Superpower}, 355 - 357.
America’s clash with Japan in the 1940s had, among its many roots, just such perceptions of an inevitable conflict between the two countries.\textsuperscript{19}

Today, the spectrum of public discourse in the U. S. - from popular culture, through mass media, to the reified musings of academics - is filled with rhetoric that frequently portrays China as an existential threat to the national security of the United States, dwells on the incompatibility of the two societies’ ideological and cultural underpinnings, and emphasizes the inevitability of “the coming war with China.” Only rarely substantiated with solid empirical evidence to support their sweeping claims of American decline in the face China’s ascendancy, such examples of cultural despair nonetheless illustrate the extent to which the specter of an existential opponent - preferably one whose social, cultural, and ideological characteristics stand in stark contrast to those of the United States - has historically been a powerful catalyst for the construction of focused strategic frameworks. In the final analysis, regardless of whether one looks at America’s rise to greatness or retreat from it, its strategic vision and the processes behind its formulation, more often than not defy rational calculation. Whether the U. S. can continue to ground its approach to the making and implementation of strategy in such variables is an issue that American policy-makers might want to address sooner rather than later given the growing limitations on American power in the early twenty first century.