

Maritime Dominance: A Cornerstone of Great Power Competition & International Stability in 2023 & Beyond

Harold Thomas Workman, World Maritime University, Maritime Affairs Ph.D. Candidate
Dimitrios Dalaklis, Professor - Maritime Safety & Security, World Maritime University
Adriana Ávila-Zúñiga-Nordfjeld, Associate Senior Lecturer - Maritime Safety and Security,
Swedish Defence University

Abstract

International conflict within the globalization era is defined by several truisms. First, political, military, economic, and societal impacts are not limited to the belligerent states involved. Second, unfettered use of the seas is imperative to: accomplishment of military objectives; vitality of national and global economies; and effective distribution of international resources. Third, the breadth and depth of international alliances and partnerships can exceed the criticality of military formidability. Lastly, the strength of public-private partnerships, military-civilian relations, and government-industry-academic cooperation is invaluable to developing the infrastructure needed to construct, operate, and sustain instruments of military power.

Historically, Great Powers have been maritime nations who bore the capability and capacity to “out-build,” “out-gun,” and “out-last” adversaries. Today’s Great Powers remain maritime nations. However, amidst realities such as rogue threats, irregular warfare, extremism, and polarization, current maritime powers must embrace the truisms above and orchestrate strategies that render these tenets as paramount objectives during periods of peace and conflict. While methodologies for achieving such vary based upon the political and economic systems in place, maritime dominance remains paramount to military success and economic vitality.

Within the globalization era, achieving maritime dominance requires a comprehensive maritime strategy that mutually addresses naval and commercial maritime objectives, integrates their respective priorities, and develops the infrastructure needed to support both fleets. International alliances and partnerships breed parity within the maritime domain and render no Great Powers able to command the seas exclusively through military might. The ongoing Russia/Ukraine conflict highlights both the significance of achieving maritime dominance and the criticality of international defense and security alliances to sustaining such. Through effective strategic planning and force allocation prior to the outbreak of hostilities, and tactical/numerical superiority immediately thereafter, Russia swiftly achieved maritime dominance throughout the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

For China and the United States, the world’s most recognized maritime powers, securing maritime dominance in various worldwide locations reflects divergent approaches, unique current/future needs, and the potential for drastically different outcomes. In simplest terms, China bears the infrastructure to produce and sustain the world’s most plentiful naval and

commercial fleets, but arguably lacks the international alliances and partnerships needed to achieve and sustain maritime dominance in waters beyond the Asia-Pacific region. By contrast, the United States bears international partnerships and coalitions that are advantageous to maritime strength worldwide, but arguably lacks the inventory, infrastructure, and comprehensive maritime strategy needed integrate naval and commercial fleets to support military sealift and economic sustainment requirements during Great Power conflict.

To effectively compete with China’s increasing maritime strength, the United States must prioritize commercial inventory requirements to a similar level as naval inventory and tactical requirements. At present, the United States is direly dependent upon non-U.S.-flagged carriers for both military sealift and economic vitality. Under current U.S. strategy, success (in peace and war) is predicated upon existing alliances being sufficiently strong to ensure sustained availability of non-U.S.-flagged vessels when needed. This philosophy not only bears national security risk, but also thwarts the infrastructure growth needed to optimally build, support, and sustain naval and commercial vessels – and thereby maintain parity with China. Resultantly, historic U.S. maritime dominance within the world’s most tactically and economically significant theaters is threatened – without timely corrective mechanics in place.

Within the globalization era, changes in maritime dominance at regional or theater levels bear the potential to change global economies, world order, and the international balance of power. The research herein highlights the significance of the U.S. commercial fleet, and threats to U.S. national security resultant from current U.S.-flag inventory levels.

Keywords: Maritime Dominance; Great Power Competition; International Alliances and Partnerships

ISMS Working Groups: Security and Defense Policy Strategy Military Strategy
Defense Management and Economics Military Education