A Bang or a Whimper?

Big Ships, Big Guns, Big Ideas and World War One

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> "You English," he said, "are mad, mad, mad as March hares. What has come over you that you are so completely given over to suspicions quite unworthy of a great nation?" (Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany)[1]

In the decades prior to World War One, five European empires – each jealous of the other's colonial dominions and wary of each other's imperium – jockeyed for dominance. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy formed the Triple Alliance, while Russia and France responded with treaties of mutual support. All courted the fading Ottoman Empire, and Japan – an enigma to most Europeans – emerged as a power in Asia.[2] Great Britain's small army was never intended to match those of her Continental rivals but her overwhelming naval power enabled Britain to maintain the balance of power in Europe and remain in 'splendid isolation'.[3] Britain's economic and political survival depended on the largest and most powerful navy in the world. Germany attempted to match Britain's navy, resulting in a massive arms race in the lead up to 1914.[4] British and German foreign policy and military strategy during the period changed as alliances came and went, as military technologies changed, as the cost of the arms race escalated, and as public and political views changed in response. Despite their strategies of domination and the attendant arms build up, naval power based on massed fleet confrontation played no decisive role in World War One and the

1 Harold Spendor and Col. Stuart Wortly, 'The interview of the Emperor Wilhelm II on October 28, 1908', *London Daily Telegraph*, October 28, 1908., The Daily Telegraph Affair - World War I Document Archive, Accessed 19 Oct 2011 http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Daily_Telegraph_Affair.

2 Robert K Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, (New York: Random House, 1991), xxv.

3 John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?: Britain, the Balance of Power and the Origins of the First World War*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), 379.

4 Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, vol. 1 (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 123-125.

dreadnoughts built to project military might and defend empire did not play as key a role in World War One as did other technologies.[5]

This article examines the development of British and German naval strategies and technology in the decades preceding World War One. It argues that the confrontation between Germany's desire for *Weltmacht* and British Realpolitik resulted in naval strategies for both sides that proved inappropriate or inadequate for their intended purpose. It proposes that the German navy's failure was relatively simple; Germany had too few ships in the wrong places, and lacked a cohesive naval strategy.[6] The British naval failure, however, is a more complex and nuanced matter. British navalism failed because the massed confrontation of big ships with big guns didn't happen quite like naval strategists anticipated. The rapid pace of change and the fluid and dynamic interplay between imperialism, politics, government administration and military technologies within each country, within Europe and on a global scale, resulted in complex, multi-factorial, multi-causal events that politicians and military planners failed to fully understand and respond to appropriately.

As the geo-political situation changed, so the responding military strategies changed and the naval and army strategies also changed in concert with the rapid evolution of technologies. After examining the naval side of these changes, this article concludes that the naval strategies of Britain and Germany in 1914 – 1918 failed to achieve their intended purpose because the orthodox thinking upon which they were built reflected the world of the 1890s and did not adequately consider the political, military and technical changes that occurred rapidly during the approach to the twentieth century. At the same time, naval strategies proved inadequate because their underpinning technologies changed more rapidly than the political and administrative apparatus could deal with. Finally – in the case of Germany – internal political machinations between army and navy factions of the body politic resulted in the German navy being under-resourced and inappropriately deployed for the forthcoming conflict.[7]

Just as the reasons behind the ultimate failure of German and British naval strategies are complex and multi-dimensional, so the study, writing and interpretation of history is not a static or elemental conception – events of the past and their importance are often deeply contested.[8] This article explores an outstanding characteristic of the period covered by this article, and that is the profound way that history and historiography impacted on global politics and on the evolution of military strategies. Two individuals stand out in their influence on pre-World War One geopolitics – U.S. naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, and H.J. Mackinder, an English academic and politician whose ideas on history and geography took form in the newly-coined fields of geography, geopolitics and geostrategy.[9] Because of the profound influence of historiography and geography

5 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 1976), 206-265.

6 Holger H. Herwig, 'The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914-1945: Mahan, Tirpitz, and Raeder Reconsidered', *The International History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 1, 1988), 81–83.

7 Holger H. Herwig, 'Admirals Versus Generals: The War Aims of the Imperial German Navy, 1914-1918', *Central European History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1972), 233.

8 Joanna Bourke, *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (Abingdon, Oxon; N.Y: Routledge, 2007), xi.

9 Brian W. Blouet, 'Mackinder, Sir Halford John', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 2008), online edition accessed 16 Jun 2012, 5. It is noteworthy that geography was then a newly taught subject, and Mackinder was appointed director when Oxford University established Britain's first university geography department in 1899: Blouet, 'Mackinder, Sir Halford John', 3.

on the period of history being reviewed in this article – both in the lead up to World War One and in interpretation e*x post facto* – this article starts with a brief review of the literature and historiography; Mahan's and Mackinder's influence is covered in the main argumentation.

Scholars examining the role of naval power in the lead up to World War One pursue three main lines of argument. Firstly, that maintaining the balance of power in Europe made Britain's role in World War One inevitable.[10] The second line of argument is that of the 'navalist' school – those in private and public life who advocated foreign and military policy based chiefly on British naval supremacy as the key to maintaining the balance of world power and British hegemony.[11] The third line is a sub-argument of the navalist school and centres on the *Dreadnought* school of naval architecture – that big ships with big guns constituted the *sine qua non* of defensive and offensive naval power.[12] More recent, revisionist historiography takes a dissenting view of these orthodox positions.

Some contemporary historians dissent from the proposition of the inevitability of Britain's involvement in World War One.[13] John Charmley, for example, mounts a cogent case that the British polity from the 1850s onwards split along the 'splendid isolation' policies of Disraeli, that influenced imperial idealism, and the navalism of the Conservative Party, and the 'Concert of Europe' position of the Gladstone-influenced Liberal Party, that urged greater British engagement in European affairs and less spending on naval armaments.[14] Great Britain's polity did not unilaterally view Germany as the enemy or as the only enemy and, importantly, did not universally support Britain's escalating spend on naval armaments.

American Arthur Marder is the historian who has most contributed to the navalist school of historiography and who has most influenced the orthodox naval history account.[15] During the 1930s through to the 1950s Marder gained privileged access to British government archives and to the personal correspondence of one of the most influential figures in pre-1914 British naval matters, Admiral Sir John Fisher.[16] Jon Sumida argues that, despite detailed and voluminous scholarship, Marder's highly selective analysis and uncritical interpretation of sources resulted in an unsatisfactory account of this period.[17] Sumida asserts that Marder's and other pre-revisionist analyses and interpretation of the available literature is unsatisfactory. He cites the following reasons: the highly classified source material from the era resulted in most published material being deliberately obfuscatory, much of the raw data used was uncollated and inexpertly analysed (if it was analysed at all), and many of the key players of the day fed selected information to the media and politicians for their own political ends, and either maintained silence after the war or

10 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 1.

11 Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (London: Cass, 1972), xii.

12 Jon Tetsuro Sumida, 'Sir John Fisher and the Dreadnought: The Sources of Naval Mythology', *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (October 1995), 619-620.

13 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 1-7.

14 Ibid., 1-7, 397-401.

15 Holger H. Herwig, 'The German Reaction to the Dreadnought Revolution,' *The International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May 1, 1991), 273.

16 Sumida, 'Sir John Fisher and the Dreadnought', 628-631.

17 Ibid., 397-401.

sanitised their memoirs.[18] So, the navalist view of this period is contested, and thus the orthodox naval history account has led to general misunderstanding of the role naval power played in World War One.

Sumida's detailed technical analysis supports the third line of revisionism, arguing against the *Dreadnought* school orthodoxy. In his *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914*, Sumida examines the financial and technical aspects of naval architecture of the era, especially the impact of constantly evolving improvements in propulsion systems, fire control systems, ballistics and armour balanced against political pressure to contain and reduce armament costs.[19] In his analysis of British Admiral Sir John Fisher's strategies, Nicholas Lambert agrees with Sumida, further arguing that Fisher wanted to build the *Dreadnought* class battleship as a proof-of-concept for his real objectives – the battle-cruiser and flotilla defence.[20] Fisher's 'flotilla defence' strategy intended to get the Royal Navy's heavy ships out of the confines of the English Channel and North Sea, where they were exposed to hostile attack by torpedo craft, and to deploy the same type of craft – submarines, torpedo-boats and coastal destroyers – in defence of Great Britain.[21] While the flotilla defended Britain, Fisher intended the fast battle-cruiser to be used in defence of the Empire, in co-operation with Empire navies and allied navies. Lambert's 'British Naval Policy, 1913-1914: Financial Limitation and Strategic Revolution' also examines the compelling financial determinants of British naval policy-making which will be discussed further.[22] In summary, then, this article follows the revisionist approach, finding the arguments based on newer material, revealed through extensive contemporary scholarship, more compelling.

While much of the orthodox literature views this era through the lens of British and German antipathy, the historical context is much broader. Between the end of the Crimean war and 1889, Britain's naval dominance slowly declined.[23] The Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 – 1871 saw the French fleet sink into decay and the newly united Germany with no navy to speak of, so Britons complacently accepted the status quo.[24] As mentioned, the British polity of the time split between the navalist 'splendid isolation' policies of the Disraeli-led Conservative Party, and the 'Concert of Europe' position of the Gladstone-influenced Liberal Party, so no strong navalist faction dominated.[25] In 1871 the spirit of Prussia passed into the new Germany, and *Reichskanzler* Bismark certainly intended to pursue the 'Great Power' dictum of Frederick the Great of Prussia, to assert the primacy of German nationalism.[26] Far from being concerned about German aspirations, Britain's complacency came to an end in 1884 when France and Russia began rebuilding their fleets

18 Ibid., 621-636.

19 Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

20 Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909', *Journal of Military History*, Vol, 59, No. 4 (October 1995).

21 Shawn T. Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918* (Boydell Press, 2012), 42.

22 Nicholas A. Lambert, 'British Naval Policy, 1913-1914: Financial Limitation and Strategic Revolution', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol, 67, No. 3 (1995), 595–626.

23 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 1976), 177–178.

24 Ibid.

25 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 397-400.

26 Eyre Crowe, 'Memorandum by Mr. Eyre Crowe', *The Testing of the Entente: 1904 - 1906*, eds. G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, vol. III, British Documents on the Origins of the War (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1928), 403-407, http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Pre_-_1914_Documents.

ahead of a prospective Franco-Russian entente.[27] Russian incursions in the Balkans and a Franco-Russian alliance meant Britain faced the grim prospect of losing control of the Mediterranean and access to India via Suez.[28] As a reaction to the Franco-Russian alliance, in 1889 Britain announced the Two Power standard and commenced building a fleet equal in power to the next two largest national fleets.[29]

Germany too felt threatened by the prospect of a Franco-Russian alliance.[30] Although too prudent to abandon her position of holding the balance of power in Europe, Britain concluded two secret agreements of cooperation with the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1887.[31] Following the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892, Germany's Foreign Minister Count Bernard von Bülow favoured the *rapprochement* with Russia after Kaiser Wilhelm II's visit to St. Petersburg in 1897.[32] That same year, the German Reichstag passed the first Naval Bill, which some in Britain saw as Germany's first signs of imperial desire.[33] Bülow saw himself as Bismark's successor, and – with State Secretary of the Naval Office, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz – architect of German *Weltpolitik*.[34] Bülow's famous 1899 'Hammer and Anvil' speech to the Reichstag conveys Germany's ambitions:

> But we'll only be able to keep ourselves at the fore if we realise that there is no welfare for us without power, without a strong army and a strong fleet. … In the coming century the German people will be a hammer or an anvil.[35]

The other architect of *Weltpolitik*, Tirpitz, entertained decidedly anti-British sentiments, lamenting a world 'rapidly becoming English' and seeing a future war against Britain as a struggle against Anglo-Saxon capitalism.[36]

Between 1871 and 1900, Anglo-Saxon capitalism added 4.4 million square miles of territory to the empire and 36 million more people.[37] The British public, press and politicians' concern to safeguard this burgeoning empire reawakened interest in navalism. The publication in 1890 of American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660 – 1783* kindled much of this renewed interest in navalism, especially in Britain and Germany.[38] Mahan's *Influence* resulted from a study of English maritime history that led him to articulate six principal conditions for nations aspiring to maritime greatness: Geographical Position, Physical Conformation

27 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 178.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914. Vol II.*, trans. E. T. S. Dugdale, Vol II, (London: Methuen & Co, 1928), 471-472.

31 Crowe, 'Memorandum ', 409.

32 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 251.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 249.

35 Bernhard von Bülow, ''Hammer and Anvil' Speech Before the Reichstag (The English Translation)', *Bülow's "Hammer and Anvil" Speech Before the Reichstag (The English Translation) - World War I Document Archive*, trans. Richard Hacken, December 11, 1899, http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Bülow /Hammer_and_Anvil_Speech_before_the_Reichstag_(The_English_Translation). Accessed 20 Oct 2011.

36 Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd, 1919), 183.

37 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 181. Note that Tirpitz's 'Anglo Saxon capitalism' did not just mean Britain but included the United States of America and the British Dominions.

38 Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 44-49.

(including natural production and climate), Extent of Territory, Number of Population, Character of People and Character of the Government (including national institutions).[39] Although aimed primarily at American audiences to stimulate interest in increasing the U.S. Fleet (Mahan was a serving officer in the U.S. Navy), Mahan's writings captured not just the imagination of the public and the press.[40] In common with many powerful figures of the day, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm and Admiral von Tirpitz diligently studied the works of Mahan.[41] The German Emperor even styled himself 'The Admiral of the Atlantic' in a speech at Reval in 1904.[42]

Although overshadowed in the public eye by Mahan, British geopolitician Halford Mackinder presented a paper to the Royal Society in January 1904 entitled 'The Geographical Pivot of History'.[43] Mackinder's 'geographical pivot' thesis centred on his proposal that Central Asia is the geographical pivot of history.[44] Prior to the fifteenth century, European cultures and communities developed out of a need to protect themselves from the highly mobile Central Asian nomads – Mongols, Huns and others.[45] The 'Columbian Era' (1493 – 1900 according to Mackinder), saw Europeans embarking on a 'westward march of empire' by sea.[46] Command of the seas, ports and sea routes that developed during this era then allowed European maritime nations to outflank the nomadic tribesman, and to possess, protect and exploit colonies in the Middle East, India and Asia.[47] At the turn of the twentieth century the Pivot came under Russian control and with the expansion of railways – especially the Trans-Siberian Railway – a vast area of the Pivot became beyond the reach of naval power.[48] In short, Mackinder's theory suggested that navalism may not have been a viable national strategy in and of itself for any nation – maritime or Continental – and ought to be reconsidered.

Mackinder proposed the end of the four century Columbian epoch of colonisation and dominance of sea power and trade.[49] With fewer options left for nations to expand globally, Mackinder saw the new locus of global power to be Central and Eastern Europe and that – to remain powerful – nation-states needed industrial strength, railways and aircraft as well as sea power.[50] The far-sighted Mackinder anticipated the rise of the twentieth century super powers and the struggle to control and colonise Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Paul Kennedy's economic history of the power shift prior to World War One backs Mackinder's thesis, concluding that nations with the greatest economic staying power and productive resources enjoy strategic advantage in any conflict; Mahanian navalism could no longer dominate national strategic thinking.[51] Mackinder

39 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1945), 3–5, 31-57.

40 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 182.

41 Holger H. Herwig, 'The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914-1945: Mahan, Tirpitz, and Raeder Reconsidered', *The International History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 1, 1988), 69–72.

42 Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, Vol. I. (London: Odhams, 1938), 24.

43 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 183-186.

44 H. J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol, 23, No. 4 (April 1, 1904), 434.

45 Ibid., 422–435.

46 Ibid., 422.

47 Ibid., 432–433.

48 Ibid., 436–437.

49 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 183–186.

50 Ibid.

51 Paul M. Kennedy, 'The First World War and the International Power System', *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (July 1,

may not have enjoyed the public prominence of Mahan, but as a prominent academic and politician, he certainly influenced British strategic planning of the period under review.[52]

A commercial force to be reckoned with and the global hegemon of the period, Britain's relative status as an industrial superpower began to recede in the closing years of the nineteenth century as German and U.S. industrial strength grew.[53] The new technologies of mine and torpedo potentially threatened Britain's traditional sea lifelines, and made Britain's traditional commerce-denial strategies of sea blockade less effective.[54] Britain had a small, mobile, volunteer army, never intended to match the massive armies of the Continental powers who could rapidly deploy troops on the now extensive European rail network.[55] The commencement in 1891 of the Trans-Siberian railway linking Russia's heartland to the Pacific Ocean certainly gave Britain concern for her Asian sphere of influence, as did Germany's plans for a Berlin-Baghdad railway which threatened Britain's control over the newly discovered oil riches of the Middle East.[56] Britain's pre-eminent position in global geopolitics and economics was being challenged.

An early reminder of the new global Realpolitik came in 1896 when America took exception to Britain's failure to respond to a U.S. dispatch regarding a border dispute between British Guiana and Venezuela.[57] Britain miscalculated the force of American public opinion and the intent of America's Monroe Doctrine.[58] An even more forceful reminder followed when Germany took exception to British raids from Rhodesia against the Transvaal.[59] On 3 January 1896 Kaiser Wilhelm sent a telegram to Boer leader Paul Krüger congratulating the Boers on their resistance. The German press acclaimed the Kaiser's initiative, but news of the Krüger telegram met with overwhelming hostility in Britain and awoke Britons to the enmity of Germany.[60] Admiral Tirpitz became a beneficiary of the furore arising from the Krüger telegram, causing him to write:

> The outbreak of hatred, envy, and rage which the Krüger telegram let loose in England against Germany contributed more than anything else to open the eyes of large sections of the German people to our economic position and the necessity for a fleet.[61]

While Halford Mackinder's thesis may have gone unnoticed outside of Great Britain, Admiral Tirpitz in Germany was an unabashed disciple of Mahan and navalism.[62] Under the leadership of Bülow and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tirpitz began building a fleet to match Britain with the first Naval Bill of 1897, and Germany continued the erratic and blustering diplomacy that destabilised and

1984), 38.

52 Brian W. Blouet, 'Mackinder, Sir Halford John (1861 - 1947)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7. Note: Mackinder was knighted in 1920 and elected to the Privy Council in 1926.

53 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 186-200.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Arthur P. Maloney, 'The Berlin-Baghdad Railway as a Cause for World War I', *Center for Naval Analysis*, Professional Paper 401 (January 1984), 1-20.

57 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 236-238.

58 Ibid., 237.

59 Massie, *Dreadnought*, 223-230.

60 Ibid., 228-231.

61 von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 65.

62 Herwig, 'The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914-1945', 69. Note: Tirpitz had 8,000 copies of Mahan's *Influence* printed and circulated in support of his naval bills in the German Reichstag.

polarised international relations.[63] Some examples: in 1897, Germany attempted to seize the Chinese port of Kiaochow, precipitating tensions with Britain and Russia.[64] On the death of Samoan King Malietoa in 1899, Germany attempted to usurp American influence in the islands, causing British and American ships to fire on the German Consulate in Apia.[65] So incensed at the slight to its 'feelings and interests' given by British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury's response to the incident, Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote a complaining letter to his grandmother Queen Victoria.[66] The Queen replied, censuring his intemperance, doubting whether 'any sovereign ever wrote in such terms to another Sovereign, and that Sovereign his own grandmother, about her Prime Minister'.[67] These seemingly trivial incidents, underscore the erratic, domineering and aggressive nature of German diplomacy at this time.[68] Where Bismark played chess, Bülow and the Kaiser played poker – and badly.[69]

Galvanised by the shock of near defeat in the Boer War and by Germany's belligerence, Britain began revising and overhauling her naval strategies. First Lord of the Admiralty Selbourne began by revising Britain's Two-Power standard in 1901.[70] Aware of the large ship-building programs of the United States, Germany and others, and aware of the inability of Britain's navy to be everywhere, Selbourne proposed a new standard drawn partly from numbers and partly from superior organisation.[71] Stepping away from isolation, Britain sought to further their relations with the United States and concluded an alliance with Japan in 1902.[72] Meanwhile, Germany enacted further naval bills to speed the building of her fleet.[73] Britain overhauled her army, set up a Committee of Imperial Defence (C.I.D.), a War Office, and appointed the brilliant, ruthless and demonic Sir John Fisher as First Sea Lord.[74]

John Arbuthnot Fisher lived by and became known by his maxims of three Rs and three Hs:[75]

> You Hit first, you Hit hard, and keep on Hitting.
> You have to be Ruthless, Relentless and Remorseless.

Fisher joined the Royal Navy as a thirteen year-old cadet in 1854, rose rapidly, and received a knighthood in 1882.[76] Fisher's 'unorthodox radicalism' reformed the Royal Navy, earning

63 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 250-283.

64 Ibid., 252-260.

65 Ibid., 270-271.

66 *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914. Vol. III*, trans. E. T. S Dugdale, vol. III (London: Methuen & Co, 1928), 64.

67 Ibid.

68 Crowe, 'Memorandum', 415.

69 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 150.

70 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 210.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 211-213.

73 Ibid., 215.

74 Ibid., 216. Note: Prior to 1964, when the British Admiralty came under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence, the Board of Admiralty consisted of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. President of the Board by convention was the First Lord of the Admiralty, a member of Cabinet of the government. Other members consisted of the Sea Lords (or Naval Lords) being the officers in command of the various branches of the navy, various Civil Lords, and the overall head of the Royal Navy, the First Sea Lord.

75 John Arbuthnot Fisher of Kilverstone, *Records / by Lord Fisher* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 76.

76 Paul G. Halpern, 'Fisher, John Arbuthnot, First Baron Fisher (1841–1920)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed.

him many friends and many enemies.[77] As Second Sea Lord and then as First Sea Lord, Fisher improved and modernised the Royal Navy.[78] He introduced the water-tube boiler, the all-big-gun ship, the submarine, and the large calibre (12 to 15 inch) naval gun.[79] To meet German rivalry he concentrated the Fleets in home waters, scrapped 154 obsolete ships and introduced the common education scheme, and an efficient system of reserve crewing.[80] When made First Sea Lord in 1904, Fisher created the Committee on Designs.[81] Fisher wanted a new type of big-gun battleship that eventually became the *Dreadnought* class. His statement of purpose to the design committee read:

> Two governing conditions [of naval warfare] are guns and speed. Theory and actual experience of war dictate a uniform arrangement of the largest guns, combined with a speed exceeding that of the enemy so as to be able to force an action.[82]

Fisher had a genius for anticipating trends in naval architecture.[83] Orthodox accounts of the Royal Navy under Fisher focus on the innovations already mentioned but overlooked Fisher's real focus – cost reduction and flotilla defence.[84]

The following table shows the defence appropriations of the great powers between 1890 and 1914:

	Britain	**France**	**Russia**	**Germany + Austria Hungary**
1890	157	142	145	185
1900	253	139	204	236
1910	340	188	312	291
1914	384	197	441	624

Table 1: Defence Appropriations of the Great Powers (US$ millions).[85]

Materiel – not manpower – accounted for most of this spending, and even for the wealthy nations this rate of expenditure on armaments needed reining in.[86] As early as 1901 the British Chancellor of the Exchequer warned Cabinet that relentless growth in naval expenditure would 'lead to financial ruin'.[87] Fisher's clear remit when made First Sea Lord in 1904 was to bring about substantial reductions in spending without sacrificing fighting capability, and his reforms to this end have already been outlined.[88] By the 1908-1909 fiscal year, Fisher's reforms had improved the

Lawrence Goldman, September 2010, Online (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 1-2, Accessed 17 Oct 2011, 1-2.

77 Ibid., 3-5.

78 Ibid.

79 Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, Vol. I., 53.

80 Massie, *Dreadnought*, 473.

81 Ibid., 470.

82 Ibid., 470.

83 Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence', 640.

84 Ibid., 641.

85 Kennedy, 'The First World War and the International Power System', 8.

86 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Random House, 1987), 7-9.

87 Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy*, 23.

88 Ibid., 26-28.

fighting efficiency of the Royal navy and reduced total annual costs by £5 million less per year than their peak of £36.9 million in the fiscal year 1904-1905.[89]

While Fisher officially championed the construction of the *Dreadnought* type battleship, what he really wanted was the battle-cruiser – a type of warship of his own conception that took advantage of developments in armour, fire control systems, wireless technology and naval gun design to produce a long range, economical, fast, hard hitting ship capable of fitting into his concept of flotilla defence.[90] In 1908 the first battle-cruisers proved their ability to steam great distances at high speed with reliability.[91] That same year the Royal Navy received its first submarines capable of effective operations for long periods at a time.[92] Submarines formed a key part of Fisher's scheme of flotilla defence.

Arguably the most significant naval invention of the era was the Whitehead locomotive torpedo.[93] By 1908 these devices – launched by torpedo boats, destroyers and submarines – could run straight for 7,000 yards and carry enough high explosive to sink a battleship.[94] Fisher aimed to reconstitute British naval strategy and envisaged two distinct and independent fleets: a main fleet of fast battle-cruisers to protect imperial interests around the globe, and his flotilla defence strategy of submarines and torpedo boats centred on the British Isles that could attack and sink enemy vessels in defensive or offensive mode.[95] Fisher's concept of flotilla defence meant that the battleship ceased to offer the best protection to Britain and made close blockade of enemy ports a risky business.[96] Flotilla defence became part of Britain's strategy by 1914 and Fisher doubled the spend on this branch, although the policy did not have the unalloyed support of Admiral Beresford, commander of the Channel Fleet, resulting in a long and acrimonious feud between the two men.[97]

Although Fisher's 'fusion design' battle-cruiser had proved to be successful, his Committee on Designs did not support Fisher's proposal to replace the building program of battleships with battle-cruisers.[98] They believed that the cementing of the Entente Cordiale between France and Britain during the 1905 Moroccan Crisis, the annihilation of the Russian fleet by Japan at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905, and Britain's entente with Russia of 1907 reduced the need for fast vessels suited to fighting at distant theatres. They believed that the battleship remained the best vessel for the most likely enemy – Germany.[99] What the committee failed to appreciate was that the rapid rate of technical innovation during this period made new capital ships quickly obsolete.[100] Fisher's innovative scheme for imperial naval defence as a hedge against obsolescence at a cost Britain could afford, while plausible, could not overturn the conventional Mahanite dictum of

89 Ibid., 113.

90 Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence', 641.

91 Jon Tetsuro Sumida, 'Geography, Technology, and the British Naval Strategy in the Dreadnought Era', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Summer 2006), 94.

92 Ibid.

93 Lambert, 'British Naval Policy, 1913-1914', 647.

94 Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence', 647-648.

95 Ibid., 647-648.

96 Ibid., 648-653.

97 Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence', 655-659.

98 Ibid., 643.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid., 647.

concentration of battleships in home waters. When conflict started in 1914, both Britain's and Germany's capital ships proved unsuitable to for their intended purpose; big ships with big guns ultimately proved inadequate.

Britain faced a naval crisis in 1912; Britain could not match the German navy in the North Sea as well as protect the vital Mediterranean and her vast overseas empire.[101] Little by little the choices reduced to a naval agreement with France to share defence of the Mediterranean.[102] As Winston Churchill recalled:[103]

> [It] closed the ranks of the entente. With every rivet that von Tirpitz drove into his ships of war, he united British opinion … The hammers that clanged at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven were forging the coalition of nations by which Germany was to be resisted and finally overthrown.

Navalists decried this reduction in Britain's traditional naval superiority, but the changing balance of powers in Europe forced Britain to 'grasp the glittering sword of Continental manufacture'.[104] The hitherto unthinkable scenario of ally France being overrun by Germany raised the spectre of invasion in Britain; the second largest navy and most efficient army in Europe could no longer be blockaded in the North Sea by the Royal Navy; their battleships, submarines, and torpedoes would be just across the Channel.[105] Mackinder's predictions were correct; the locus of power had shifted from the high seas to Continental Europe.

Fisher retired from the navy in January 1910 – forced out after a bitter and protracted feud with his nemesis Beresford and his supporters.[106] By this time the Admiralty's credibility and efficiency had suffered and the government installed Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, to restore Cabinet's confidence in the navy's ability to act decisively in times of crisis, to continue the focus on economies, and – most importantly – to bring it into line with general strategical policy.[107] On becoming First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911, Churchill wasted no time in sending for Fisher, whom he knew and admired.[108] Churchill wanted Fisher's knowledge, drive and innovation but most of all he wanted Fisher to solve a very major problem – the liquid fuel problem.[109] For equal horsepower propulsion, oil-fired ships required one-third the engine weight, almost one-quarter the daily tonnage of fuel, and the radius of action of an oil-powered fleet was up to four times as great as that of the comparable coal-fired ship.[110] Wholesale conversion to oil-power eventually received Cabinet approval in 1912. To change the foundation of the Navy from British coal to foreign oil was a formidable decision in itself.[111] This decision's long term global significance goes well beyond World War One, because secure supplies of oil became a domestic and strategic necessity for all powers.

101 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 223-225.

102 Ibid., 225.

103 Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, Vol. 1, 89.

104 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 229.

105 Ibid., 229-234.

106 Halpern, 'Fisher, John Arbuthnot, First Baron Fisher (1841–1920)', 6.

107 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 235.

108 Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, Vol. 1, 56.

109 Ibid., Vol. I., 103.

110 Engdahl, 'Oil and the Origins of the Great War', *History Compass*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (November 1, 2007), 2047.

111 Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, Vol 1, 101.

By 1914, Germany's bellicose and inept diplomacy destabilised and polarised Europe.[112] Britain's foreign, naval and military policies underwent enormous changes in response to the changing international Realpolitik. Nations responded to the changing international politics with massive building of naval and land armaments; new technologies and innovations coincident to the building caused inbuilt obsolescence even before the ships and arms were put into service. The enormous cost of this arms race focused governments of all complexions on prudent fiscal management and control. Mackinder's 'Columbian era' drew to a close and *Pax Britannia* faded as Britain lost economic and industrial leadership, and as her naval superiority receded while her own and her enemies armies grew.[113] Secretary of the Committee on Imperial Defence Lord Hankey noted afterwards:[114]

> From that time onwards there was never any doubt what would be the Grand Strategy in the event of our being drawn into a continental war in support of France. Unquestionably the Expeditionary force, or greater part of it would be sent to France.

Anticipating war, Churchill ordered the Grand Fleet to war stations in Scapa Flow and other Scottish bases on 31 July.[115] On the evening of 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany, and on 5 August, the War Council met and decided overwhelmingly to send an expeditionary force to support Belgium and France against German aggression.[116] Confident of contributing to the defeat of Germany, the Royal Navy strategic plan contained three elements: firstly, it expected to meet and overwhelm the German High Seas fleet, secondly it planned to carry out commerce warfare and thirdly, it planned to exert pressure on Germany by the traditional means of blockade.[117] Of these elements, only blockade met with partial success – the other two were complete miscalculations.[118]

Britain enjoyed geographic advantage in the North Sea theatre; its superior fleet and bases in the north and south effectively closing off Germany's exits to the open Atlantic.[119] Germany's unwillingness to meet the Royal Navy on unfavourable terms kept the High Seas fleet bottled up, resulting in stalemate.[120] In August 1914 Beatty's battle-cruisers penetrated the Heligoland Bight, sinking three German cruisers and a destroyer for no loss. On 22 September 1914, a single German U-Boat sank three British armoured cruisers; already the massive pre-war expenditure on Mahanite capital ships started to look absurd.[121] In January 1915 Beatty's force put to flight Hipper's battle-cruisers at the Dogger Bank, sinking the *Blücher*.[122] These sorties were the overture for the only major naval battle of World War One, Jutland.

Admiral Scheer sortied on 31 May 1916 and met up with Admiral Beatty's battle-cruisers off Jutland, punishing them heavily until Admiral Jellicoe's main fleet of battleships arrived to turn

112 Charmley, *Splendid Isolation*, 250–283.
113 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 237.
114 Ibid., 235.
115 Ibid., 176.
116 Ibid., 240-241.
117 Ibid., 241.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 242-243.
120 Ibid., 244.
121 Ibid., 245.
122 Ibid.

the tide.[123] Scheer launched a mass torpedo attack forcing the British fleet to turn away and making good his escape. In terms of numbers, the British lost 6,097 men, three battle-cruisers and three armoured cruisers, against German losses of 2,551 men, one battleship and one battle-cruiser.[124] Germany claimed Jutland a victory but in reality the conflict was indecisive and neither the British Grand Fleet nor the German High Seas fleet fought any further major action, bringing the big-ship war to a standstill.[125] The German High Seas fleet of 1916 was not large enough to force a decisive outcome, so Jutland did not alter the strategic balance of the war at sea.[126] As Admiral Scheer put it to Kaiser Wilhelm II after Jutland – 'there can be no doubt that even the most successful outcome of a fleet action in this war will not force England to make peace'.[127] Scheer had grasped the three-fold nature of Germany's maritime plight in World War One: numerical inferiority, inferior strategic position, and lack of strategic insight.[128]

Admiral Scheer's recommendation for the future conduct of the naval war centred on 'defeat of British economic life' through submarine warfare, a radically different approach to the pre-war strategy of massed fleet actions.[129] He quickly discovered that Tirpitz's pre-war resistance to submarine and seaplane development had left Germany with only 104 U-boats at the beginning of February 1917, when it decided to stake its future on that force.[130] Germany continued to build submarines up to the end of hostilities and German U-Boats sunk eight million tons of allied merchant shipping, causing great distress to the British Empire, but German submarines proved unable to deliver a fatal blow to the allied war effort.[131]

One postscript to the role of the navalist strategies in World War One illustrates how some in the ruling elite misunderstood the strategic use of naval power, and that is Winston Churchill's ill fated attempt to force the Dardanelles by naval power in 1915. Turkish shore batteries sank the French battleship *Bouvet* and seriously damaged two others, while Turkish mines sank the British battleships *Irresistible* and *Ocean* and seriously damaged the battle-cruiser *Inflexible*.[132] This disastrous campaign forced Churchill's resignation from government.[133] A final postscript occurred with the last naval gunfire battle of World War One, when British Admiral Sturdee chased the squadron of Vice-Admiral Graf Spee to the Falkland Islands, sinking *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*.[134]

This article has argued that Anglo-German relations constituted only part of the geopolitical situation prior to World War One and that all the Great Powers concluded alliances with each other for convenience and support. Because of reliance on the sea, Mahanite navalism became Britain's central strategical orthodoxy. It has been shown that many in Britain's ruling elite adhered to policies of orthodox navalism either because they did not understand or did not agree with Sir Halford Mackinder's thesis demonstrating the end of the Columbian era and the consequent shift

123 Kennedy, 'The First World War and the International Power System', 246.
124 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 246.
125 Ibid., 247-248.
126 Herwig, 'The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914-1945', 81-83.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 249.
132 Ibid., 256.
133 Ibid., 257.
134 Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy*, 289-290.

in the locus of power to continental Europe. The innovative British Admiral John Fisher and others did understand this strategic shift, reorganising the Royal Navy and introducing radical new technologies in response. It has been demonstrated that these innovators achieved only partial success in implementing their revolutionary naval technologies against the political reality of pre-war government and naval administration. Fisher and Churchill did however reduce costs and increase fighting effectiveness through radical changes to the Royal Navy's organisation and materiel and through converting the fleet from coal-fired to oil-fired propulsion, a decision that went on to have profound geopolitical impact, particularly in the modern Middle East.[135]

Finally, this article has produced evidence that the German navy also followed a path of Mahanite navalism. Although Germany's submarines caused great distress to Britain and her allies, her High Seas fleet entered World War One insufficiently prepared for the tasks expected of it. The High Seas did bring the British Grand Fleet to battle at Jutland but did not force a decisive outcome, and German submarines could not deliver a fatal blow.[136]

Bellicose and inept German attempts at *Weltpolitik* – aimed at toppling British hegemony to achieve *Weltmacht* for Germany – destabilised and polarised international relations and brought Europe to war in 1914. The naval defence strategies of Britain and Germany proved inadequate in 1914 – 1918 because the Great Powers went to war using outmoded strategies based on obsolete technologies. The submarine, torpedo and mine along with aircraft, wireless and tank became the major defence technologies of sovereign nations after 1919, and the battleship faded into obscurity.[137] Manoeuvring for territorial conquest and oil autarky in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia after 1919 became the salient feature of global geopolitics up to the present time.

135 Engdahl, 'Oil and the Origins of the Great War'.

136 Herwig, 'The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914-1945', 68–105.

137 Robert Goralski and Russell W Freeburg, *Oil & War: How the Deadly Struggle for Fuel in WWII Meant Victory or Defeat*, (New York: Morrow, 1987), 15-52.