

Sea Power of Asia – a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

According to George Moldelsky and William Thompson, authors of *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494-1993*, ‘*in global war conditions, navies have proved decisive in winning the contest in global proportions*’

Approaching International Relations as a historical social science, I wish to focus on the fact that Asia's three sub-regions - South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia along with the Indian and Western Pacific oceans have constituted a single strategic system for the past two centuries. Given the present scenario of ongoing Malabar sea exercises, future regional order in ‘larger Asia’ will also emerge from the interdependence of continental and maritime power.

History is witness to many naval battles that have shaped its destiny. This piece offers a chronological glimpse of some famous naval battles that determined the fate of Asia.

Keywords

Maritime power, Indo Pacific region, naval power, historical narrative

Introduction

‘*He who commands the sea has command of everything.*’ Francis Bacon c 1600

Oceans played an important role in the history of civilizations as they facilitated the spread of ideas. Presently, oceans generate conditions to influence the political, economic, social, and military domains through sea power and naval power is the ‘power giving’ military component of sea power.

‘Seapower is the *sine qua non* (an essential condition) of action in global politics.’:

Moldelsky and Thompson.

The enabling power of the oceans is critical in allowing the projection of military power around the globe. The oceans favor the mobility of naval forces to operate in international waters and allow access to maritime areas near the coastlines, where ‘half the world’s population lives within sixty km of the sea and three-quarters of all large cities are located’

As per Alfred T. Mahan, the United States naval officer and historian, ‘*Trade and politics are interlinked, and nations are bonded by their interests in such a way that the whole forms an articulated system.*’

Historic Naval Battles

Battle of the Yalu River (1894)

Japan opened to the world only in the mid-nineteenth century, following centuries of seclusion. Its Meiji Restoration in 1868 launched the island nation onto the path to outward westernization. In 1894, both China and Japan sent troops into Korea. The Koreans put up a good land fight and moved up to the China – Korea border at the Yalu River.

On 17th September, a Japanese naval force under the command of Admiral Sukeyuki Ito intercepted Chinese ships commanded by Admiral Ting Juchang heading into the Yalu river mouth.

The Chinese opened fire at a range of 5,000 meters. Most of their fire missed targets because of extreme dispersion. The Japanese waited patiently for twenty minutes and fired while closing in, for the sake of maximum effect and damage. They moved at twice the speed across the Beiyang fleet making themselves difficult to hit. They then baffled the Chinese by sending one of their squadrons into the center to attack the weakest ships on the right flank. The other squadron went the other way and the Chinese fleet was completely sandwiched between two Japanese squadrons. The engagement ceased at sunset when most ships of the Beiyang fleet had been sunk, seriously damaged, or had fled.

The Japanese lost no ship. In fact, they strategically ‘cleaned’ the Yellow Sea of Chinese influence which is why this battle is also called the Battle of the Yellow Sea.

The victory enabled the Japanese to cross River Yalu and invade Manchuria followed by the fall of Port Arthur (Lushunko) and massacre of the whole population. It also secured most of the coastal access of the route to Beijing.

The battle hastened the collapse of China's dynastic order, among the most fateful events to convulse Asian history in centuries.



Image 1: Battle of the Yalu River by Kobayashi Kiyochika

Battle of Tsushima (1905)

After the defeat at Yalu, only one major power stood as an obstacle to the growing influence of Japan on the world stage. This was the power of Imperial Russia that had the presence of three naval fleets spread in the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Pacific.

In January 1905, the naval base of Port Arthur fell to Japan under Admiral Heihachiro Togo. In a series of attacks, Admiral Heihachiro Togo's Combined Fleet followed up the demolition of Russia's Port Arthur-based fleet by sending the Russian Baltic Fleet to the bottom.

Japan launched a surprise naval attack against Port Arthur, a Russian naval base in China following the Russian rejection of the Japanese plan to divide Manchuria and Korea into spheres of influence. This came as a shock for the Tsar, who in turn declared war eight days later. In this struggle, the Qing Empire was favorable to the Japanese and offered

support and goods. Manchurian irregulars and levies joined both sides. The result favored the Japanese and the Russian fleet was decimated.

After losing the Pacific Squadron, the Russian Tsar, Czar Nicholas II hoped that the Russian Baltic fleet under Admiral Zinovy Rozhdestvensky would be able to challenge Admiral Togo's supremacy at sea. He dispatched the Baltic Fleet on a twenty-thousand-mile voyage from the Baltic, around the Cape of Good Hope, through the Indian Ocean, and into the Far East. Togo's freshly refitted fleet intercepted the Russians between Japan and Korea, handing Asians their first meaningful victory over a European imperial power in centuries. During the two-day Battle of Tsushima Strait which began on 27th May 1905, more than thirty Russian ships were sunk or captured. A string of defeats followed. The Russians lost their entire Baltic fleet. They lost eight battleships, numerous small vessels, and more than five thousand men while the Japanese lost three torpedo boats and only one hundred and sixteen men. It put to rest Russian ambition to expand.

By August Russia was forced to accept a peace treaty at New Hampshire, mediated by President Theodore Roosevelt who negotiated peace in the Russo-Japanese War 1904-05. For this, the President was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



Image 2: Admiral Heihachiro Togo on the bridge of Battleship Mikasa

Battle of Midway (June 1942)

The Battle of Midway was one of the most significant battles fought in the Pacific Theatre of World War II six months after the attack on Pearl Harbour and one month after the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Historian John Keegan called it, *'the most stunning and decisive blow in the history of Naval warfare.'*

The US conclusive victory in the air-sea battle from 3rd June to 6th June 1942 destroyed Japan's hopes of ruling the seas during World War II and turned the course of history.

The US Navy under Admiral Chester, W Nimitz, Frank J Fletcher and, Raymond A Spruance defeated the Imperial Japanese Navy fleet under Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Chuichi Nagumo, and Nobutake Kondo near the Midway Atoll.

Success was achieved because US cryptanalysts broke the Japanese communication code to conclude that the Japanese were planning an attack at Midway to draw out and destroy the US Pacific fleet's aircraft carrier striking forces and establish Japanese airbases on the islands. The information from the breaking of the code allowed Admiral Nimitz, the American Fleet Commander to set up an ambush by having his carriers ready. On 4th June, the trap was sprung. The readiness and perseverance of the Americans cost the Japanese four fleet carriers as opposed to one lost by the US. Most importantly the Japanese lost one hundred irreplaceable, trained pilots.

The Japanese plans to advance into Fiji, New Caledonia, and the Solomon Islands were stalled and the balance of sea power in the Pacific began a definite shift.



Image 3: Battleship Yorktown impacted by torpedo in the Battle of Midway

Battle of Guadalcanal (August 1942- Feb 1943)

Japanese troops arrived at Guadalcanal, a 2500 square mile jungle speck in the Solomon Islands, to construct an airbase called the Henderson Airfield. The Americans landed two months later. It was the first time that the Americans went on the offensive to attack the Japanese. A complex series of battles lasted six months from 7th August 1942 to 9th February 1943.

The allied naval forces were led by Admiral Richmond Turner. The Japanese were led by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto.

Initially the Japanese won a naval battle off Savo Island by sinking four allied cruisers and isolating the US marines on Guadalcanal and landing soldiers to take back the island. The Americans managed to protect the island by bombing Japanese ships.

In the middle of November, the Japanese launched a major attack involving ten thousand soldiers. Fierce fighting ensued but by 9th February 1943, the US had taken total control of the island and the airfield. The US lost less than two thousand soldiers and twenty-nine ships while the Japanese paid a heavier price and lost more than twenty thousand soldiers and thirty-eight ships.

The capturing of the Henderson Airfield allowed the Americans to dominate the air battles henceforth.

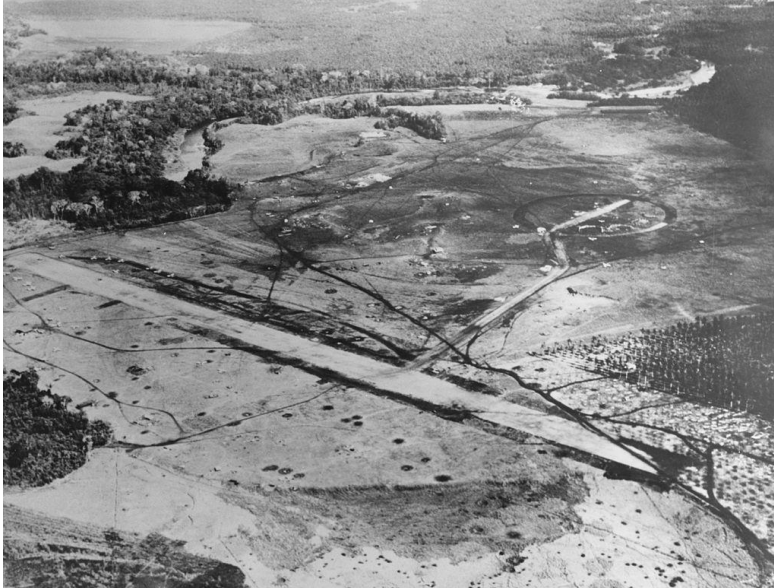


Image 4: View of the Henderson Airfield, on Guadalcanal August 1942

Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 1944)

Within hours of the destruction of the US battle fleet at Pearl Harbour, the Japanese forces began their assault on the Philippines in their endeavor to establish a new world order. The Allied forces landed at the Philippine Island of Leyte on 22nd October 1944. The Japanese command knew that if the Philippines were lost, the war was also as good as lost.

Desperate, they collected their forces to take a chance of destroying the American forces at Leyte.

Leading the Seventh Fleet and Central Philippine Attack Force was Vice Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid as Task Force 77. The combined Japanese Fleet was led by Admiral Soemu Toyoda from Tokyo, Japan.

The battles from 23rd to 26th October resulted in the greatest battle of World War II. Japanese “Operation Victory” resulted in a loss of three battleships, one carrier and twenty-four vessels of various kinds. The Allied Forces destroyed the Imperial Japanese Navy and led to its decisive defeat in 1945.



Image 5: US Armada moving towards Leyte Gulf

Acknowledgements

The list of battles in this article has been presented as per the author's interpretation of the history of naval battles based on her understanding of the impact they had on the destiny of nations. It may be pertinent to point out that the Battle of Midway was not fought in Asian waters but finds a place in this list as it is an important link in the events that impacted the outcome of World War II and the future of Japan.

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