INTRODUCTION

MARITIME STRATEGY AND NATIONAL SECURITY
IN JAPAN AND BRITAIN

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A 1969 study of the first decades of interaction between Japan and the UK pointed out that when formal diplomatic relations were established, the ‘two island empires’ had very little in common. In the author’s view, the differences were many, substantial and could be summarized as follow:

Britain, a world-wide empire dedicated to free trade; Japan, a group of four islands, almost isolated from the world for more than two centuries by a self-imposed seclusion policy. Britain, a constitutional monarchy run by a parliamentary system; Japan, a decadent military dictatorship. Britain, a rich strong manufacturing nation; Japan, a traditionally feudal society undermined by a developing money economy. Britain, a stronghold of Protestant evangelism; Japan, since 1616 the declared persecutor of Christians. Britain, the advocate of an informed public opinion; Japan, a nation without a press, her masses generally denied political knowledge.¹

This tinted vision of their differences notwithstanding, in two respects the author considered Japan and the UK very similar. Each people had a rich but vastly different cultural heritage, intense national consciousness, and an assurance of superiority. Each had long felt the security of insularity while profiting by the cultural influences of a neighbouring continent.² At a point in time when Japanese and British social, economic and political structures were as opposite as night is to day, geography still drew the two countries close together. Their similar ‘insularity’ meant in fact that the sea had had a crucial strategic role in national security. Whether as a staging platform for imperial trade

² Ibid.
and expansion, or as a ‘stopping force’ against foreign invasions, the way Japanese and British authorities approached the use of the sea had a direct impact on the policies they developed to pursue the defence of the national realm.

What about today? One hundred and fifty-three years after diplomatic relations were established in 1858, is geography still relevant in matters of strategy and national security in Japan and the UK? Geography hardly ever changes and therefore, instinctively, one would feel tempted to answer ‘yes, it does matter’. Yet, across more than a century, many other external and domestic factors affecting national security policy, including the international landscape, national political orientations, economic outlook, technological know-how and industrial output have changed. How has the relationship between the strategic use of the sea and national security evolved since the second half of the nineteenth century? Does ‘insularity’ maintain a meaning that is distinctive to the strategies underpinning Japanese and British security? Does sea power still matter to Japanese and British political and military calculations to develop sound defence policies? How should this relationship inform military relations between Japan and the UK?

This book addresses the above questions, exploring the role of sea power in shaping Japanese and British national defence policy across the past century and a half. In this book, sea power is referred to in its ‘historical/cultural’ dimension. As a notion, ‘sea power’ lacks a universally agreed definition. There are, however, two main ways to understand it. The first falls within the intellectual tradition established by American strategist and naval educator Captain Alfred T. Mahan, US Navy (USN). It focuses on the ‘strategic’ and military dimensions of sea

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3 American realist scholar John Mearsheimer argued that the sea possesses an inherent ‘stopping power’, imposing severe limitations to state actors in their ability to wage war across extended water masses. This notion has been criticized in more recent scholarly work for it underestimated the use of the sea, throughout history, to project power away from national shores. In this context, the key point is that in pre-modern times, the geographic distance existing between Japan and the neighbouring Asian landmass – greater than that existing between the UK and the European continent – made an invasion of the archipelago a rather expensive and logistically complex affair. Until the nineteenth century, only the Mongol expeditions of 1274 and 1281 threatened the independence of the Japanese archipelago. In pre-modern times, the political and financial costs to develop and maintain the technological know-how to project forces and sustain them across the seas represented a key factor in the ‘stopping power’ of the sea. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). For a critique of Mearsheimer’s notion, Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, ‘Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?’, *International Security*, Vol. 35, 2010:1, 7-43.