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# Correspondence

## Sea Powers, Continental Powers, and Balancing Theory

David W. Blagden

Jack S. Levy and  
William R. Thompson

*To the Editors (David W. Blagden writes):*

In their article, Jack Levy and William Thompson argue that leading sea powers have neither the capability nor the incentive to threaten the domestic political order of other major powers, and are thus more likely to be bandwagoned with as a supplier of global public goods and potential ally against continental threats than balanced against (pp. 16–18).<sup>1</sup> This argument is plausible, and their data set supports their hypotheses (pp. 30–36). As such, this response does not represent a wholesale criticism of Levy and Thompson’s work; on the contrary, it recognizes that “Balancing on Land and at Sea” represents a major contribution to alliance theory and the broader realist research program. There are, however, aspects of the argument that require development. Below, I discuss three dimensions of Levy and Thompson’s article that could be strengthened and therefore merit further scholarly attention. I then reconsider how their findings might be related to wider theoretical debates that, at present, Levy and Thompson consider inadequate.

### STRATEGIC CHOICE OR GEOGRAPHIC LUCK?

The largest gap in Levy and Thompson’s causal story about the relative threat posed by sea powers and land powers is that it is not clear whether military technology or strategic geography drives the observed outcomes. Sea powers focus on maritime strength for a reason—usually, when their principal strategic threats are separated from them by a large body of water. In short, great sea powers tend to be insular powers—they benefit from the absence of other great powers on their landmass—and notably, on Levy and Thompson’s coding, the naval leader has not been a continental power since 1699 (p. 27). Dependence on maritime commerce also plays a role in driving states to generate naval strength, but such dependence is itself often causally related to insularity. A focus on procuring naval strength over land forces represents a strategic choice over which states have control, but whether a state is insular or continental is largely a matter of blind luck.<sup>2</sup>

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*Jack S. Levy is Board of Governors’ Professor at Rutgers University. William R. Thompson is Distinguished Professor and Donald A. Rogers Professor of Political Science at Indiana University.*

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1. 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, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 7–43. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Of course, the United States pursued an active policy to drive other great powers from its landmass, while the United Kingdom was itself forged when political union ended intra-British secu-

Levy and Thompson's causal argument about the benign nature of "sea powers" is thus left underspecified. Is it actually states that focus on naval strength that are perceived as nonthreatening to territory, or is it simply insular powers that are perceived as nonthreatening—with a tendency to focus on sea power serving as an observable by-product of their insularity?<sup>3</sup> The argument that navies are of much lower utility than armies for menacing domestic political order, all else held equal, is hard to refute. But would an insular power actually look more threatening to other great powers if it procured more land forces at the expense of reducing its maritime strength, or do its oceanic moats make it appear more benign regardless of its strategic choices?

The contemporary United States, for example, is the system's leading sea power and the leading land power (albeit by a lesser margin). Levy and Thompson code such dual leaders as sea powers, on the basis of their naval primacy, and argue that this coding is unproblematic for their analysis, because they are simply interested in assessing other states' reactions to concentrations of maritime strength (p. 24 n. 51). Yet such a dismissal does become problematic when trying to assess whether it is the fact of naval forces or the fact of insularity that drives lesser powers' perceptions of territorial threat. After all, if Russia or Germany—continental powers—possessed the contemporary United States' level of ground war capability, other European states would presumably be more concerned than they presently are—and may well seek to balance against a concentration of land power against which they do not currently balance. Levy and Thompson avoid the question of whether it is geographical insularity or military "marinism" (p. 17) exerting causal influence in their story by comparing sea powers with a category of states that are interchangeably termed "land" and "continental" powers (p. 16). Such terminology explicitly attributes two different, albeit causally related, characteristics to the latter type of state—one relating to military posture, the other regarding geographical situation—while leaving "sea powers" with one explicit characteristic (military posture) and one implicit characteristic (geographic insularity). This means that the relative causal weighting that should be attached to geography as compared to military-strategic choices never comes up for consideration.

Such unresolved questions do not in themselves reduce the importance of Levy and Thompson's findings. Sea powers may be perceived as more benign because of their oceanic separation and because their military capabilities are less territorially threatening, and the fact that insularity and marinism are themselves related means that both variables probably point in the same direction much of the time. Either way, the empirical discovery that lesser great powers do not tend to ally against leading sea powers—even when the lead power possesses a large and possibly rising share of the system's aggregate capabilities—remains noteworthy. Such underspecification does, however, raise questions about the hypothesized causal pathway underlying the observed out-

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ity competition—so in neither case is insularity purely a product of luck. Nonetheless, being the only great power on a landmass protected from all other great powers by oceanic moats is an option that has been geographically open to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, but not open to Germany, Russia, France, China, India, or any of the other historic great powers in continental Eurasia.

3. This question is not wholly new. Colin S. Gray, for instance, asks, "Is the demarcation line between sea power and land power a simple matter of physical geography, or is the division more functional and strategic?" Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 3.

comes, and that uncertainty may be significant when considering the wider academic and policy implications of Levy and Thompson's data.

A second issue arising from "Balancing on Land and at Sea" is that whether or not a type of military capability floats on water is only one proxy for its precise characteristics—most notably, its ability to secure its possessor state without posing a domestic territorial threat to others. As Levy and Thompson themselves note—following Francis Bacon's 400-year-old observation, that "he that commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much [or] as little of the war as he will"<sup>4</sup>—the sea can be both a barrier and a highway (p. 38 n. 80).<sup>5</sup> Of course, power projection across water is always hard in absolute terms, but certain types of maritime capability are much better suited to it than others, particularly in the contemporary era.

This distinction is important because it cuts back to the core of Levy and Thompson's causal argument. The hypothesized perception of sea power as intrinsically benign—and therefore unlikely to be balanced against—rests on the assumption that naval power cannot threaten other powers' domestic political order as effectively as a commensurate resource expenditure on ground forces could. If, on the other hand, sea power is actually an effective means of threatening lesser powers' core security interests, then the argument that maritime strength will not provoke a balancing response becomes logically circumspect. This is not to suggest that aggregate metrics lack utility, particularly given article-length scope constraints. Nonetheless, to consider the extent to which any individual sea power threatens other powers' security, Levy and Thompson's own call for balancing theorists to directly analyze specific capability types (pp. 40–41)—including their power-projecting utility—must be taken further still.

The two challenges discussed above are intimately related. A continental power that focused on maritime capability would certainly be less capable of conducting a ground offensive against nearby states—although it would also leave itself vulnerable, and is therefore unlikely to choose such a posture. By contrast, an insular power has to acquire maritime capability if it wants to conduct aggression. Thus, the continental-versus-insular distinction emerges once again, with geographical circumstances playing a large part in observed outcomes regardless of states' force choices. For insular powers, sea control is the key backstop to security—but maritime power projection is also the key enabler of offensive action. Indeed, if anything, insular powers would look more benign if they focused on land power, given the corresponding reduction of maritime power projection capability.

This is not an argument about divining intentions from procurement choice signals, with all of the problems that such an argument would entail.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is solely an argument about capabilities: for insular powers, the crossing of water must be an integral component of successful aggression. If, as seems likely, power projection across water is always harder in absolute terms than across land, then it may well be that insular powers are intrinsically more benign than continental powers—even when they are keen on

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4. Francis Bacon, "Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates," in Charles W. Eliot, ed., *Essays, Civil and Moral* (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909–14 [1625]), p. 11. This statement obviously holds more truth for the inhabitants of insular powers than for continental peoples.

5. This is nicely put in Norman Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy: Navies and National Interests* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 4; and Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, p. xii.

6. On the significance of pervasive uncertainty over other states' intentions, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 31.

power projection. Nonetheless, an insular power's choice of type of maritime power will affect the severity of the threat that it poses, depending on whether it acquires maritime power projection capabilities or confines itself to sea control capabilities. Accordingly, a lesser power's fear of the leading sea power is likely to be guided as much by the leader's relative level of power projection capability as by the simple fact of its naval strength.

Applying this logic to the situation of the contemporary United States is helpful. Are policymakers in Beijing or Moscow more likely to conclude that the United States does not represent a balancing-worthy security threat as a consequence of Washington's focus on naval (and maritime-aerial) strength at the expense of the additional U.S. ground forces that could otherwise be procured? Or do the unrivaled and unprecedented power projection capabilities of the United States—capabilities that, as an insular power, are intrinsically maritime—give such lesser powers' policymakers more cause for concern than if the U.S. armed forces were optimized for sea control and territorial defense alone? The implication is that if the United States is indeed perceived as a benign force in great power politics, this would seem to owe more to its insularity than to its strategic choices.

A third problem in the current formulation of Levy and Thompson's article is its dismissal of the potential significance of internal balancing evidence (pp. 23–24). Insofar as Levy and Thompson are seeking to make an argument about alliance formation, an exclusive focus on external balancing is entirely appropriate.<sup>7</sup> The causal logic underlying their argument, however, is about the relative threat presented by sea and land powers—a logic with the potential to engender outcomes other than alliance behavior. Accordingly, the true test of this causal rationale must be the degree of total balancing generated—both of the external and internal varieties. In other words, Levy and Thompson's current empirical test omits a crucial half of the data salient to their purported explanation. That states are not forming alliances does not necessarily prove the argument that they do not feel threatened by leading sea powers if they are simultaneously acquiring the internal capability to constrain the leading sea power's freedom of operation in their littoral areas and maritime region. For instance, it is not hard to imagine that normal behavior for second-tier sea powers might be a hedging strategy of external bandwagoning (to reap the public goods provided by the leading sea power) while internally balancing (by acquiring maritime capabilities that could be used to hinder the leading sea power if necessary).

Again, this point ties back to the prior discussion of how fine-grained capability analysis beyond simple aggregate naval strength indices may tell markedly different causal stories. If weaker sea powers choose capabilities that complement the leading sea power in its global public goods-providing role—say, logistical auxiliary ships—this would be evidence in favor of the contention that leading sea powers truly are nonthreatening to lesser powers. If, by contrast, they forgo the sorts of capabilities that are optimal for the support role in favor of retaining the capability to become obstructionist if necessary—say, attack submarines—this could be evidence in favor of the hedging hypothesis.

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7. Levy and Thompson also list a set of methodological concerns over the difficulty of accurately measuring internal balancing (pp. 23–24). These are valid, but given the importance of internal balancing to their overall causal story, it nevertheless merits consideration.

Of course, for this argument to gain traction, lesser great powers must be able to obtain at least some degree of internal balancing capability. If meaningful internal balancing against the naval leader is simply impossible, then there is no need to measure anything other than alliance formation. Levy and Thompson appear to be inclining in this direction when they assert that competitive navies—and the resources required to procure them—are scarce, typically not extending to more than three great powers at any given time (p. 28). And certainly, when considering the truly global exercise of sea power, such an assumption is hard to refute.

Yet the sea—like the land—is amenable to asymmetric forms of balancing, because sea control—rendering the sea secure for your own military and commercial purposes—is much more costly to achieve than sea denial—which simply aims to prevent an opponent from achieving sea control.<sup>8</sup> To internally balance the leading sea power's battle fleet does not require another globally competitive battle fleet, at least when focusing solely on denying the lead power sea control in the lesser power's coastal waters. Levy and Thompson's data implicitly assume symmetric balancing, which they correctly judge to be hard to achieve, but a more complete test of their purported causal logic would also have to include asymmetric balancing. For if lesser sea powers are observed eschewing oceangoing fleets to focus on building regional, littoral, and coastal maritime defensive capability, this might suggest that the leading sea power of the time is perceived as quite the opposite of a nonthreatening force.

To consider asymmetric maritime balancing in practical terms, even during the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy's dominance ended at the 3-mile limit to which French shore batteries could fire a cannon ball—and since then, the technological tide may well have been on the side of the sea deniers. Certainly, since the start of the twentieth century, submarines, mines, land-based aircraft, fast attack craft, and—the particularly topical concern of Western navies—long-range, high-capability antiship missiles have progressively constrained the littoral operations of lead-power battle fleets for much less than the cost of building a competitive rival battle fleet. Levy and Thompson contend that the Soviet Union's "ambivalence" about sea power is what led its carrier-building efforts between the 1930s and 1980s to be intermittent (p. 19). Moscow expended considerable resources, however, pursuing maritime forces capable of conducting the asymmetric balancing task most relevant to Soviet needs—namely, denying use of the northeastern Atlantic to Western resupply convoys long enough to overrun NATO forces in Europe (a task that did not require concerted carrier-building). Levy and Thompson concede that a study focused solely on the Cold War would have to take account of internal balancing, displaying awareness of such concerns (p. 24). Nonetheless, once the potential asymmetry of maritime balancing is considered, there may be enough cases of meaningful internal balancing against the naval leader for its omission to become problematic.

As a final corollary to this point, if one accepts that internal balancing must represent an integral component of a net assessment of total balancing behavior, the "matter-of-time" balancing theory that Levy and Thompson associate with the work of Kenneth Waltz and Christopher Layne cannot yet be dismissed (pp. 9–10). For if evidence of internal balancing or hedging against U.S. maritime capabilities is apparent in analysis of

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8. U.K. Ministry of Defence, *British Maritime Doctrine*, BR 1806 3d ed. (Norwich, U.K.: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2004), pp. 41–43.

contemporary lesser powers' capability choices, this would count in favor of the Waltz/Layne position. Levy and Thompson note that other contemporary major powers seem more concerned about regional threats than about the United States—with the “notable exceptions” of China and Russia (p. 37). These are notable exceptions indeed. If analysis of Chinese and Russian maritime procurement choices displays evidence of internal (albeit asymmetric) balancing against U.S. capabilities, this would suggest that it is at least possible to feel seriously threatened by the leading sea power.<sup>9</sup>

SEA POWER, OFFENSE-DEFENSE THEORY, AND THE OFFSHORE BALANCERS

Levy and Thompson argue that their data demonstrate that prior explanations of balancing behavior—including accounts of the lack of balancing against the contemporary United States—are inadequate. Universalist propositions that states will always balance against concentrations of power are found to be wholly incorrect, while alternative modifications of the balancing proposition all have gaps (pp. 36–39).

The call for balancing theorists to more precisely specify their scope conditions is welcome. Nonetheless, there are two concepts integral to prior and wider debates in realist theory that Levy and Thompson's data directly support. And insofar as these concepts play a crucial underpinning role in alternative accounts of balancing behavior, this suggests that there is at least a case for considering Levy and Thompson's findings to actually represent new empirical support for enduring concepts.

First, Levy and Thompson's data suggest that there may be a meaningful offense-defense balance in international relations. Offense-defense theory argues that states are less of a threat to each other, making war less likely to break out, when achieving political goals through military aggression is relatively hard, and that war is more likely when the opposite is true.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, certain formulations of offense-defense theory take the interaction of military technology with strategic geography to be of causal importance.<sup>11</sup> Insofar as geography can influence the relative ease of attack or defense, such a formulation appears appropriate at least some of the time, particularly when considering relations between great powers of systemic importance.

Levy and Thompson's empirical study seems to demonstrate that oceans—and the military technology that controls them—are indeed heavily defense favorable. Accordingly, their data support the idea that there can be a meaningful offense-defense balance, at least on a definition of the concept that considers technology in its geographical context. And insofar as a number of prior accounts of balancing behavior attribute substantial causal importance to the idea of a meaningful offense-defense balance, the evidence in “Balancing on Land and at Sea” may be taken as supportive rather than as a challenge.

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9. Levy and Thompson do not deny that leading sea powers can be perceived as dangerous by lesser powers if their behavior becomes aggressive (p. 42); my point, however, is that the capability itself could engender concern.

10. For a seminal early articulation, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), p. 188.

11. For an example of this approach, see Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, “What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 61–68. For a recent comprehensive critique of narrower conceptions of offense-defense theory, see Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

Levy and Thompson touch on the offense-defense balance in a footnote (p. 38 n. 81), suggesting that Stephen Walt fails to appreciate the extent to which offensive threat is endogenous to categorical differences in types of power. As a broader point, however, the discussion here suggests that it should be possible to support at least some wider theory of great power politics that attributes a nontrivial causal role to the offense-defense balance with Levy and Thompson's findings. Moreover, insofar as such an understanding of the offense-defense balance relates solely to the feasibility of conducting successful transoceanic aggression, this is an argument that bypasses the debate between offensive and defensive realists over the possibility of signaling benign intentions.

Second, Levy and Thompson's data directly support John Mearsheimer's argument that the stopping power of water seriously impedes even the most capable states' power projection efforts, and the corollary finding that insular great powers—because of their moats—can act as nonthreatening offshore balancers.<sup>12</sup> Of course, Mearsheimer's offensive realism can itself be criticized for dismissing the notion of a meaningful offense-defense balance, only to bring it back in—as the stopping power of water—to explain why the two greatest powers of their respective historical epochs, the United Kingdom and the United States, have not behaved according to certain other prescriptions of offensive realism. And to qualify his argument's explanatory reach, the relationship between insularity and offshore balancing is only probabilistic, rather than necessary, as Imperial Japan's behavior up to 1945 demonstrates.

Nonetheless, Levy and Thompson's data seem only to bolster Mearsheimer's conclusions about the stopping power of water and the correspondingly nonrevisionist nature of offshore balancers. Levy and Thompson contend that their account substantively differs, because what Mearsheimer is actually arguing for is the stopping power of land after water (p. 38 n. 80). And certainly, Mearsheimer's assertion of the universal primacy of land power looks questionable in light of his own findings on the stopping power of water: after all, for water to have stopping power, states must have the means to stop an adversary successfully crossing water.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, despite a possible minor difference of opinion over the precise mechanism by which large bodies of water impede the invasive capability of armies, Levy and Thompson's findings directly support Mearsheimer's broader argument that insular powers are both less territorially threatened and less territorially threatening. Such a conclusion in turn buttresses the case recently made by Mearsheimer and Robert Pape, among others, in favor of offshore balancing as a sensible grand-strategic choice for insular powers.<sup>14</sup> Their focus is naturally on the United States, but similar arguments can be made—at least in the regional context—regarding the contemporary United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia.

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12. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 114–128, 234–266.

13. To be fair, Mearsheimer has also stressed the critical role to be played by the U.S. Navy in more recent policy advocacy, even while a focus on the universal primacy of land power remains a feature of his landmark theoretical work. On the former, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, No. 111 (January–February 2011), p. 33. On the latter argument, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 83–137 (although even here he qualifies his finding by noting that for insular powers, a naval focus has "made good strategic sense," p. 81).

14. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," pp. 16–34; and Robert A. Pape, "To Beat the Taliban, Fight from Afar," *New York Times*, October 14, 2009.



CONCLUSION

Levy and Thompson have produced an important piece of research that further refines balancing theory. Their assembled data are impressive, and the purported causal story is plausible. Nonetheless, three aspects of their work—the question of whether strategic choice or simple geography drives outcomes, the possibility of certain varieties of maritime force having nontrivial offensive utility, and the issue of internal maritime balancing—merit further scholarly consideration. Moreover, their data may be taken to strengthen, rather than challenge, the related concepts of the stopping power of water and the broader offense-defense balance, which in turn carries implications for the wider realist research program. Accordingly, if this response spurs Levy and Thompson—along with the wider scholarly community—to pay further attention to issues arising from “Balancing on Land and at Sea,” then it will have served its purpose.

—David W. Blagden  
Oxford, United Kingdom

*Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson Reply:*

We are pleased that David Blagden is persuaded by our theoretical argument and empirical evidence that great powers do not tend to ally against the leading sea power in the system, and that he regards our work on land powers, sea powers, and balancing to be a major contribution to alliance theory and to balance of power theory.<sup>1</sup> Blagden attempts to qualify our analysis, however, by arguing that we fail to isolate the causal effects of military technology and strategic geography; that we ignore the role of internal balancing; and that we neglect “asymmetric balancing” by giving too much emphasis to naval power projection capabilities and not enough to sea denial capabilities. Blagden also claims that our work reinforces offense-defense theory and hypotheses about the stopping power of water. These are important issues, and we welcome this opportunity to respond to these criticisms and to clarify our argument.

NAVAL TECHNOLOGY VERSUS STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY

Blagden argues that the “largest gap” in our argument is the underspecification of the causal mechanism driving different balancing behavior against sea powers than against land powers. He asks whether the significantly less threatening nature of sea powers derives from their naval capabilities or from their insularity. Blagden argues that geographical separation from other major powers by large bodies of water, which eliminates land-based threats to their territorial integrity, allows insular states to become sea powers.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is the insularity of sea powers, rather than their naval capabilities, that

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1. 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, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 7–43. For evidence of a systematic tendency for great powers to balance against hegemonic threats (but not against lesser threats) in the European system, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Hegemonic Threats and Great Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–2000,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January–March 2005), pp. 1–30.

2. Blagden states that the opportunity to become a sea power has been available only to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan but not to Germany, Russia, France, China, India, or the other historic great powers in continental powers of Eurasia (n. 2).

minimizes the threats they pose to other great powers and that accounts for the relative infrequency of great power balancing against the leading sea power in the system. Blagden concludes that the strategic choice to develop naval strength over land forces is endogenous to insularity, and that insularity is a matter of “blind luck.”

The question of what causal mechanism drives our results is an important one, and Blagden makes a useful analytic distinction between naval capabilities and insularity, but in the end, his causal argument is unpersuasive. First of all, Blagden’s assessment of the relationship among insularity, threat perception, and strategic choice is too deterministic. Insularity often has an impact, but it is not a necessary condition for the development of sea power. The effects of the insularity of the United States have been undeniable, but few if any other great powers have enjoyed a comparable degree of geographic separation. The English Channel has provided some degree of protection for states on either side for many centuries, but it did not prevent numerous English invasions of France (most notably during the Hundred Years’ War) or successful invasions of the British Isles by various Celtic/German tribes, Romans, Vikings, Normans, and the Dutch (in 1688). The failure of Spain’s cross-channel invasion (the Armada of 1588) owed as much to bad weather and bad luck as to geography. Britain’s four century-long policy to prevent the Low Countries from falling under the control of a continental power was driven by repeated fears of a cross-channel invasion.

Leading sea powers prior to British dominance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enjoyed even less geographical separation from continental powers. The Netherlands had to contend with land-based threats from Spain and France as it developed into the leading sea power of the seventeenth century. It had dikes that could be breached to make land invasions more difficult—except when frozen waters allowed easy passage to cavalry. Portugal, as the leading sea power of the sixteenth century, had no insularity from Spain and, in fact, was absorbed by Spain in 1580. Venice had only swamp to protect it from European invaders. Genoa had some insularity, but not because of water. If we go back further in time, Minoan, Carthaginian, Athenian, and Phoenician sea powers were all conquered by nearby land powers.<sup>3</sup> Although insularity undoubtedly contributes to the defense of territory, that protection is far from absolute.

The question of whether states become maritime traders because they are islands or because they have access to oceans is an old one in geopolitics. It is certainly true that insular status or access to the coast is a necessary condition for becoming a sea power, but it is far from sufficient. Many strong insular states did not become maritime traders, as illustrated by Japan for many centuries. It even took Britain a great deal of convincing and a military defeat by France in the Hundred Years’ War to remind it of the potential advantages of its insularity and of specializing in maritime trade.

States sharing both coastlines and continental neighbors vary in their relative emphasis on maritime versus continental orientations. The presence of large neighbors has not always prevented coastal states from developing substantial maritime interests and the naval capabilities to support those interests. Spain under Philip II, the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and France under Louis XIV each became the leading sea power in the system despite significant land-based threats to its territorial frontiers. But

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3. We discuss some of these cases in Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *The Arc of War: Origins, Escalation, and Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

these states could have made different choices, and in fact their outward orientations often varied over time, in part because of the influence of domestic power struggles as well as changing external threats.<sup>4</sup> Shifting domestic coalitions can also lead to changes in the orientations of insular states over time, as illustrated by England's varying attitudes toward the "continental commitment."<sup>5</sup>

"Blind luck" may determine insularity, but the relationship between insularity and state strategic choice or orientation is probabilistic rather than deterministic. It might go too far to say that insularity is what states make of it, but Blagden takes us too far in the other direction.

Implicit in these remarks is the argument that it is neither insularity nor naval capabilities per se that makes sea powers less threatening to other great powers. Rather, it is the strategic orientation of sea powers—away from the continent and away from the core interests of continental states—that minimizes the threat they pose to other great powers, at least in the context of the modern system, in which for nearly five centuries most of the great powers have been European. This systemic context is important. In a system consisting primarily of insular sea powers, a dominant sea power would generally be more threatening than a dominant land power to the interests of other leading states in the system.

One fairly distinctive aspect of the European system, especially from the 1490s to 1945, was the duality of power, the presence of a number of major powers with different types of capabilities. Some states developed land power and engaged in territorial aggrandizement in their region; others developed sea power and directed their attention to control of the seas and their maritime empires; and others alternated between these two strategic orientations. Most threatening, both to other land powers and to the home bases of sea powers, were states perceived as seeking regional hegemony. The primary interest of sea powers was not territorial aggrandizement at the expense of their neighbors, but the expansion of overseas trade and naval capabilities. Their interests on the continent were limited to preventing the emergence of a dominant state that might control continental resources and use those resources to threaten the territorial integrity and global interests of the leading sea power. England is the classic example.

Sea powers created global public goods as a by-product of their maritime interests, which helped to attract other great power allies,<sup>6</sup> but it was the absence of territorial ambitions in the home region that made sea powers less threatening than predominant land powers.<sup>7</sup> Leading sea powers played an important role in balancing coalitions against hegemonic threats on the continent, but they were not seen as significant threats

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4. On the domestic sources of the strategic orientations of Spain and France, respectively, see David Ringrose, *Madrid and the Spanish Economy, 1560–1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Edward W. Fox, *History in Geographic Perspective: The Other France* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971). Another domestic variable affecting strategic orientation might also be the degree of fear of the impact of armies (much more than navies) on domestic liberties.

5. Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972); and Steven E. Lobell, "The Political Economy of War Mobilization: From Britain's Limited Liability to a Continental Commitment," *International Politics*, Vol. 43, No 3 (July 2006), pp. 283–304.

6. Blagden speaks of bandwagoning with public goods providers. We prefer to restrict the bandwagoning concept to the strategy of allying with, as opposed to against, the source of security threats.

7. Hans J. Morgenthau recognized this in his argument about the characteristics of "balancer"

to other great powers unless they were also leading land powers.<sup>8</sup> This was rare, but cases include Spain under Philip II and France under Louis XIV. This argument about the distant and outward orientation of sea powers suggests that, contrary to Blagden's claim, insular (or coastal) powers would not be more benign if they shifted resources from sea power to land power (assuming that this shift in force posture was associated with a shift in strategic orientation).

#### INTERNAL BALANCING

Blagden also questions our focus on external balancing to the neglect of internal balancing through buildups in armaments. We have theoretical as well as methodological reasons for our focus on coalitional balancing. Theoretically, it makes a difference whether a state builds up arms against a particular rival to advance its own parochial interests, or whether it joins others to prevent a leading state from achieving a position of dominance from which it can threaten the interests of all states in the system.<sup>9</sup> Given our aim of analyzing counterhegemonic balancing, an alliance of two or more states is a much better indicator than a military buildup by a single state.<sup>10</sup> Multilateral alliances are an even better indicator of balancing for the collective good of avoiding hegemony than for advancing particular goals with respect to a particular rival. Still another consideration is that the few empirical studies exploring trade-offs between internal and external balancing have failed to find much of a relationship, suggesting that the incorporation of internal balancing might not have much value added.<sup>11</sup>

Putting these analytic issues aside, we believe that our results are sufficiently strong as to be unaffected by the incorporation of internal balancing. We encourage Blagden and other scholars, however, to undertake such an effort, but to do so in full recognition of the theoretical issues raised above and also of the magnitude of the data collection effort.

#### ASYMMETRIC BALANCING

Related to internal balancing through arms buildups is Blagden's argument that, by focusing on ships of the line, we are capturing "sea control" capabilities ("rendering the

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states and their stabilizing role in a balance of power system. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

8. Contrary to Blagden's statement that we code these dual leaders as sea powers, we do not code states as to whether they are primarily land powers or sea powers. We identify the leading sea power for the purposes of analyzing counterhegemonic balancing in the global system, and we identify the leading land power for the purposes of analyzing counterhegemonic balancing in the European system. See Levy and Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea," p. 24 n. 51.

9. On the importance of dyadic rivalries, see Michael Colaresi, Karen A. Rasler, and William R. Thompson, *Strategic Rivalry: Space, Position, and Conflict Escalation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For an attempt to sort out the impact of dyad-level rivalry and system-level threats of hegemony on great power alliance formation, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Do Great Powers Balance against Leading Powers or Rivals (Or Both)?" unpublished paper, Rutgers University and Indiana University, 2011.

10. In terms of internal balancing, perhaps simultaneous armaments programs in several states might be another useful indicator of counterhegemonic balancing.

11. Benjamin A. Most and Randolph M. Siverson, "Substituting Arms and Alliances, 1870–1914: An Exploration in Comparative Foreign Policy," in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley Jr., and James N. Rosenau, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), pp. 131–157.

sea secure for your own military and commercial purposes”) but not necessarily “sea denial” capabilities (“to prevent an opponent from achieving sea control”). Blagden argues that “asymmetric balancing” in the form of “building regional, littoral, and coastal maritime defensive capacity” should also count as balancing. He refers to Napoleon’s shore batteries keeping the Royal Navy at a 3-mile distance and, in the last century, submarines, mines, land-based aircraft, fast attack craft, and antiship missiles as relatively low-cost ways of constraining the littoral operations of the battle fleets of the leading sea power.

There are two issues here. One is the identification of the leading sea power. Presumably, Blagden agrees with our use of ships of the line or their functional equivalents to identify the leading sea power at a particular time and then to analyze targeted balancing against the leading power. The second issue is what constitutes balancing and, more specifically counterhegemonic balancing, which is our focus. Blagden wants to include the building of sea denial capabilities—including regional and coastal defenses—along with oceanic naval capabilities as indicators of internal balancing. The concept of the denial of sea control, however, naturally raises the question of “denial of control over what?” If the aim is “denying the lead power sea control in the lesser power’s coastal waters,” Blagden may be right that mines, submarines, and land-based aircraft are useful. If the aim, however, is protecting trade and sea lines of communication and avoiding the neutralization of your fleet by an enemy blockade, which can be the functional equivalent of defeat, then coastal and littoral defense capabilities have a limited impact, and Alfred Thayer Mahan’s argument about control of the seas is closer to the mark. In that case, the distinction between sea control and sea denial breaks down.<sup>12</sup> In addition, as we argued in the last section, defending against particular threats from particular adversaries is different from counterhegemonic balancing to prevent a single state from achieving such overwhelming capabilities that it is able to dominate all other states in the system. Coastal and littoral defenses serve the former function, not the latter, and they are not a useful measure of counterhegemonic balancing.<sup>13</sup>

#### SEA POWER AND OFFSHORE BALANCING

Blagden also claims that our theory and evidence provide support for offense-defense theory, for hypotheses about the stopping power of water, and for policy arguments in support of offshore balancing.<sup>14</sup> We treat these only briefly. As for the stopping power of water, we do not claim that water inherently has stopping power. Water stops armies but enables navies, though the question for navies is how far inland their power can be projected after crossing water. In terms of the implications, if any, of our argument for offense-defense theory, this is a very complicated issue and requires much more theo-

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12. Capt. A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Dover [1890] 1987).

13. In the early nineteenth century, the United States made a strategic choice to build coastal defenses rather than a blue-water navy, not to balance against Britain but instead to lessen the likelihood of a Copenhagen-style preventive strike by the leading sea power of that era. Similarly, China’s current naval buildup, which many regard as designed to neutralize U.S. coercive capabilities on the Taiwan Strait issue rather than to project Chinese power on a global level, is better conceived in terms of rivalry dynamics rather than counterhegemonic balancing.

14. On the last two, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

retical development than Blagden offers. Nearly all applications of offense-defense theory have been to land warfare rather than to naval warfare, where characteristics of weapons systems (e.g., mobility) have different meanings or impacts. Thus the United States declared, at the time of the League of Nations Conference for the Reduction and Limitation of Armaments in the early 1930s, that the qualitative distinction between offensive and defensive weapons could not be applied to navies.<sup>15</sup> Liddell Hart, a proponent of the qualitative principle, agreed. A good deal of theoretical work is required before the implications of our arguments and findings on balancing at sea can be applied to offense-defense theory.

#### CONCLUSION

David Blagden expresses the hope that his commentary on “Balancing on Land and at Sea” helps to stimulate debate on issues relating to balancing and other interrelated topics. It has certainly done so, at least for us, as it has provided us with the impetus to clarify and extend our argument. We argue that the relationship between strategic geography and strategic choice is probabilistic rather than deterministic, that insularity contributes to but does not guarantee protection, that coastal and even insular states have adopted a variety of strategic orientations toward land and sea, and that it is a state’s strategic orientation that is the primary determinant of the threat it poses to nearby land powers. We suggest that one must be careful in discussing the role of internal arms buildups in counterhegemonic balancing, given the analytic distinction between balancing against a hegemonic threat to the system as a whole and responding to particular threats from a strategic rival. Similarly, we concede the value of asymmetric responses to particular threats, but question their utility against hegemonic threats. Finally, we argue that much more theorizing is necessary before one can draw implications from our analysis of sea power for offense-defense theory, which has focused almost exclusively on land warfare. We have hardly offered the last word, however, and we would be delighted if others would engage this debate.

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15. Jack S. Levy, “The Offensive-Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 1984), pp. 219–238, at 225–226.