



# Historical Teachings on the Failure of the German Imperial Navy in Geopolitical Perspective

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**Abstract.** At the beginning of its establishment, the German Empire followed the Prussian emphasis on the land army and neglected the development of the navy. However, as Wilhelm II came to power, the empire's resources began to be tilted toward the navy, making its naval military power leap to the second in the world before World War I. From the perspective of geopolitics, as a land and sea composite state, the German Empire needed to deal with the pressure from both sea and land directions in developing its navy, as well as the dispersion of strategic resources, which contributed to the failure of the Imperial Navy in WWI. Therefore, for this kind of composite state, in developing naval power and land power at the same time, it is necessary to take a balanced approach and balance the resources from both directions; if the navy is over-expanded, it will certainly cause the traditional naval power countries and neighboring countries to be defensive and hostile, which will eventually lead to limited development.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics · Land and Sea Composite State · German Empire · Navy · Naval development

## 1 Introduction

Western scholars mostly use the term “peripheral states” to refer to states with both land and maritime locations, and most studies on the rise of these states are based on geopolitical and geostrategic perspectives on the development of maritime power of these states in a national or comprehensive manner.[1] Domestic studies on land and sea complex states mainly analyze the thesis from the geopolitical perspective [2], focusing on the analysis and study of the experiences and lessons learned from the rise of naval power in modern Europe, such as France and Germany. The historical experience of the land and sea complex countries in modern Europe proves that a country on the sea will have to face many dilemmas and challenges brought about by the defects of its geopolitical conditions when developing naval power. The challenges and dilemmas are unavoidable, and what lessons can be drawn from the failure of the German imperial navy as a land and sea-based state? This will be discussed in the article.

## 2 Background of the Rise of the German Imperial Navy

After three dynastic wars, Prussia successfully unified the German region and established the Second German Empire. After the unification, the industrial revolution of the German Empire started smoothly, the domestic social conflicts were well resolved, the social security system was reasonably constructed, and the successful foreign policy created a favorable external environment for the development of the German Empire. These provided sufficient time and space for the development and rise of the German Empire, and the German Empire rose rapidly.

The Second German Empire at the beginning of the unification was focused on consolidating its land power, and the development and expansion of land boundaries had been the traditional base of Germany's development. However, with the development of foreign trade and the rise of the imperialist frenzy to carve up the world, the German Empire was captivated by overseas trade and colonial expansion. The Bismarck approach of concentrating on land power was no longer appropriate in this period, and the German Empire needed to take the initiative and join the other imperialist countries in their efforts to divide up the world for its own benefit. In order to protect the country's overseas interests and seize overseas colonies, the development of a navy became an important task during this period.

Throughout history, the rise of all world powers has been closely related to the sea. The sea is not only an economic artery, but also the most convenient and quickest military line of communication and the most extensive strategic maneuvering space, and it is very important for the development of a country to obtain the right to control the sea. Whether a country can obtain the right to control the sea depends on three factors, namely, the navy, maritime trade and control of sea lines of communication. The navy is not only a tool to obtain the right to control the sea, but also a strong backing to protect maritime trade and an important means to control the sea lines of communication. Therefore, the navy has a very important strategic position in the overall situation of national security and development.

As the leader of the German Empire, Wilhelm II believed that if Germany was to dominate the world, it had to have an invulnerable navy. In addition, the "The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783" proposed by Mahan was translated and published in almost all European countries during this period, and was taken as a guideline by many countries. The importance of the sea was already self-evident, and the development of the navy of the Second German Reich had become inevitable.

## 3 The Concept and Characteristics of the Land and Sea Composite State

Germany, with both land and coastline, is a geopolitical land-sea composite state. It is a geopolitical concept jointly proposed by Prof. Shao Yongling and Prof. Shi Yinhong, which mainly refers to a category of areas bordering open ocean and backed by less natural barriers to land [3]. The theories related to the rise of naval power in land and sea complex states are mainly based on the "fringe" theory of Nicholas John Spykman and the "naval power" theory of U.S. Navy Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan [4].

Nicholas John Spykman thinks that there are three major centers of power in the world: the Atlantic coastal region of North America and the coastal regions of Europe and the Far East, and that the concentration or divergence of power in these three marginalized regions will have a significant impact on the security interests of nations [5]. This is different from British geographer Halford Mackinder's "heartland". Mackinder saw the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa together as an island in a vast world ocean, called the "world island", and the central part of Eurasia as the heart of the world island. According to Mackinder, the countries that master the central zone will continue to grow stronger and have the ability to expand to the margins of Eurasia. While Spykman believes that the marginal regions have the potential to characterize world power.

According to Mahan: "The control and use of the sea has always been an important factor in world history and has played an extremely important role in the prosperity and flourishing of a country." The prerequisite for becoming a powerful nation is to vigorously develop and maintain maritime trade, and in order to protect vested maritime interests, it is necessary to build a strong navy [6]. In addition, Mahan believes that the realization of absolute sea power is dependent on solid land power, and that sea power and land power are mutually constrained and interdependent.

By analyzing the development of naval power in four land and sea complex states, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, Shao Yongling and Shi Yinhong summarize the strategic features of general significance concerning land and sea complex states: the basic inclination of the nation (state) is an intrinsic factor determining the direction and future of such states; land and sea complex states are usually faced with the dilemma of strategic choice of direction; and double vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> It has special characteristics that distinguish it from island and landlocked countries at the geographic and strategic levels. The geographic combination of land and sea makes it unable to prioritize consolidation of maritime power construction in the security field and focus on maritime economy in the economic and trade field as the island countries do; nor does it operate land-based defense and land-based economy to the fullest extent as the landlocked countries do [7]. The Atlantic-oriented belt of Europe is a typical representative of the land-sea complex,<sup>3</sup> Germany is a land-sea complex country. Therefore, this paper uses the concept of land and sea complex state to analyze the reasons for the failure of the German Imperial Navy.

## **4 Analysis of the Reasons for the Failure of the German Imperial Navy in Terms of the Land and Sea Complex Country**

From the introduction of the concept of land-sea complex state above, it can be concluded that a land-sea complex state, on the way to develop into a land-sea complex power, will invariably be caught in the strategic dilemma of developing sea power and land power. This chapter will analyze the reasons for the failure of the Second German Empire Navy in terms of geographical location and strategic resource dispersion.

### **4.1 Geographical Constraints**

Geographical factors are important factors influencing a country's development strategy. The German Empire was limited by geographical aspects in the development of its navy,

and this paper will discuss both the objective geographical location and geopolitical characteristics of the German Empire.

#### **4.1.1 Poor Objective Geographical Conditions**

The German Empire's coastline has limited the development of its navy to some extent. As a traditional land power country, the German Empire has an embarrassing coastline. Because of the northern border with Denmark, the coastline was cut into two parts, east and west. The eastern coastline faced the Baltic Sea, which was similar to the Mediterranean Sea and was relatively closed. In order to enter the Atlantic Ocean, ships from the countries along the Baltic Sea must go around the Jutland Peninsula. The eastern coastline was not of great strategic value. The western coastline of the German Empire was shorter and faced directly into the North Sea, but it was also a relatively closed marine environment. There are only two ways out of the Atlantic, one is the British-controlled English Channel, and the other is directly north, out of the sea off the Danish dependency of the Faroe Islands. This meant that it was vulnerable to British and Danish encumbrances. Even if Denmark and Britain did not hold back the German Empire, the German fleet would need an extra week's worth of fuel from Wilhelmshaven to sail into the North Atlantic.

In addition, because the coastline was divided, the east and west coasts of Germany could not communicate directly by sea. For example, if a ship from the western coast of Germany wanted to go to the eastern coast, it had to first go north and then east, bypassing several straits held by Denmark, in order to reach the western coast. The same is true for the east coast to the west coast. In order to alleviate this awkward situation and to avoid the need for warships to navigate around the Danish peninsula, the German Empire started the construction of the Kiel Canal, widening and deepening the riverbed, but it was still not as convenient as the natural straits.

In addition to the defective coastline, the German Empire also lacked excellent overseas bases and bays. There were only a few major ports in Hamburg, Wilhelmshaven and Kiel. The naval ports of Cuxhaven and Wilhelmshaven were not deep enough [8]. The eastern section of the coastline was longer but limited to the Baltic Sea, and the important port of Kiel was blocked by Denmark to the north, making access to the sea difficult. The German Empire did not achieve much in the expansion of colonies and had few overseas colonies. The German colonies were scattered in Africa and Oceania, which were far away from the German mainland, scattered among themselves, and lacked good natural seaports. These natural constraints had an adverse effect on the development of the German Empire's navy.

#### **4.1.2 Complex Geopolitical Environment**

The Empire was surrounded by three major powers: France to the west, Russia to the east, and Austria-Hungary to the south. Access to the sea in the north was narrow and extremely restricted. The sea access to the Atlantic Ocean was blocked by Sweden, Denmark and England.

German-French relations have always been hostile. The Prussian Emperor Wilhelm I was crowned in Versailles. This act undoubtedly strained the already hostile relationship between the two countries and deepened the hatred between them. The foreign policy under Bismarck was also to unite with other countries to isolate France, and the irreconcilable degree of conflict between the two countries was evident.

After Wilhelm II came to power, he did not choose to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, but chose to be close to Austria-Hungary, and the relationship between Germany and Russia was in a delicate state. At the end of the eighties, the conflict between the German Empire and Russia was deepening due to mutual conflicts of interest in trade. This created an opportunity for France to bring Russia into the fold. And finally France and Russia concluded a military alliance in 1892.

British-German relations had long been in a delicate balance, but this balance was broken after the German Empire's vigorous naval development. The reason for this is that, the advantages of the dominant maritime powers are based on two foundations, namely, continental parity and economic and naval leadership, which are closely linked, because any practice of maintaining continental parity will fundamentally benefit the dominant maritime powers in maintaining their relative economic and naval security [9]. William II pursued a world policy of naval construction. This was not only intended to change the balance of power on the European continent, but would also have an impact on Britain's attempt to maintain its absolute naval superiority. Therefore, in the process of the German Empire's vigorous naval construction, it was checked by Britain and the two countries were caught in an arms race.

The intensification of the Anglo-German conflict led to the decline of the original conflict between Britain and France, the two countries formed the Anglo-French Alliance. Under the coordination of France, Britain and Russia also reached a settlement, and the Triple Alliance was formed. At this time, Germany had only one ally, Austria-Hungary, and was blockaded by Britain at sea and faced with a double-sided attack by France and Russia on land. The blind development and expansion of the navy without taking into account its own realities, and the stubbornness to build up the navy in spite of the vigilance of the neighboring countries and the frequent conflicts, would lead to its isolation and eventually become a target.

## **4.2 Fragmentation of Strategic Resources**

The sea and the land are both opportunities for external development and in many cases pose a double risk and challenge to national security. Most of the land and sea complex states are under the attack of land and sea forces, and for the basic needs of national defense, they must try to maintain a certain balance in the development of both land and sea, and their limited resources are thus spread out.

The German Empire, which emerged from Central Europe, was inherently geographically flawed, with a narrow territory in the north that was adjacent to the sea but vulnerable to restraint and surrounded by three powerful neighbors on land. Without sufficient strategic depth and resources, the German Empire focused on building up its ground forces and had to ensure the presence of a large land army to defend itself against its two powerful neighbors, Russia to the east and France to the west. The German Empire had the highest land army in Europe at the time, if calculated as a percentage of the total

population [10]. While the development of the navy did not receive sufficient attention for a long time.

However, after Wilhelm II came to power, he tilted the strategic resources of the German Empire toward the navy, and the navy was thus developed to a greater extent. The excessive military investment in the navy crowded out most of the budget and led to a considerable shrinkage in the investment in the army compared to the previous one, and the combat effectiveness would be reduced as a result. At the same time, the naval development of the German Empire aroused the concern of Britain, and the naval armament race began. It was not until 1913 that the German Empire called a halt to the naval arms race. But it was too late, as resources had been tilted toward the navy for many years, the German Empire's land forces were not as strong as before. In addition, when Germany developed its navy, it rigidly applied the doctrine of naval power, dogmatically implemented the grand strategy, and devoted its resources to naval construction, making it not only hopeless to establish maritime hegemony, but also lost its traditional advantages of land forces. It can be said that the German Empire's blind naval expansion annoyed the neighboring countries and put itself in an isolated situation.

History proved that the German Empire had to fight on two fronts, east and west, against two land powers, France and Russia, and that the consequences of years of under-investment in the land forces became apparent during the war. This was part of the reason for the defeat of the German Empire, while the naval fleet, which accounted for the bulk of the Empire's budget, was blockaded in the straits and reduced to a "maritime luxury".

## 5 Conclusion

The German Empire, as a land and sea composite state, had been unable to balance the distribution of sea and land resources in the development of its navy. During the reign of Wilhelm II, Germany blindly invested a large amount of resources in naval development without considering his own geographical location, which also laid the groundwork for later failure. In addition, the development of the German navy was always constrained by the domestic political system, foreign policy and naval command system. Due to all these factors, the German Navy was finally destroyed. Therefore, if a country wants to develop naval power, it must first consider its own geopolitical situation, lay a strong economic and scientific foundation for the development of naval power, cultivate the maritime consciousness of all people, establish a long-term correct naval policy and naval strategy, and actively strive for a peaceful and stable international environment for naval development.

In terms of geopolitical characteristics, China is also a typical land and sea composite country, which means that in the process of development, it is bound to face strategic dilemmas and has the characteristics of being doubly vulnerable. The experience of the German empire tells us that the development of maritime power should be combined with objective strength support, and not to lose one's strategy due to blind development. The interests and security of the sea should be synergized with the security of the land. The path of China's maritime power development should be a unification of maritime rights subordinate to China's sovereignty and the realization and maintenance of the resulting maritime power. [11] It must not fall into the temptation and trap of global sea

power struggle. At the same time, mutually beneficial cooperative relations with neighboring continental countries should be strengthened to build a favorable geopolitical environment.

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