

Europe, the great mother of wars, the chief market of the world, the chief arbiter for peace, with its overflowing population seeking where to go, and for new outlets, is a nest of armed naval and military forces.

The very propinquity of huge armies to each other, the existence of the telegraph and its effect in hastening and, perhaps, too often in precipitating, decision, render sudden wars more probable than even heretofore. While all preach and express a hope for peace, yet all prepare lest war should come; it is not possible to adopt a greatly different course, or to pose contented, unarmed, in our ever-increasing, envy-provoking condition. We must take the world as we find it, and show, while we wish for peace, we are determined to hold our own.

The action taken by the colonies in the erection of batteries, and in the creation of considerable forces of all kinds, shows that they accept the condition that war is possible. They recognize that when war once breaks out no one can foresee the consequences. There is no escape from it. There is no land so distant as to be free from its direful influences or from its effects. If this was true, as history tells us it was, in days gone by, how much more is it the case now, when distances are bridged and prevailing winds and other obstacles are overcome by modern war appliances.

Still, as a general strategic principle, the chief focus of war (Europe) having been pointed out, it is clear, however much we as a nation may be scattered over the wide world, our main fleet—the main naval strength of the nation—must remain near the focus, and, if possible, prevent the immediate effects of war being felt beyond the seas adjacent to that focus, wherever it may be. In fact the more extended and the more scattered the interests to be defended, the more desirable it is to circumscribe the field and the immediate consequences of war.

Supposing an opposite course was adopted, and we scattered our naval forces so as to try to be everywhere, we should be weak at all points, and an enemy whose total force was much inferior to our own would be able to take the initiative, and to appear in superior strength and numbers at any point he might select. We may be pretty confident he would not select a point for attack that was strong and far distant from his own base. As a general principle we come to this in each case of war: Wherever your enemy is you must get as near him as possible if you would frustrate his designs, and the further you are from him the less likely you are to meet him, and the less able you are to hinder him.

If the above is accepted it will follow that any force that is localised, viz., one whose action is limited designedly for special purposes and to special seas, while it may be of the greatest value, and its existence but a sequence to the general principles above sketched, it does not fall into place side by side with the main force, but is rather an adjunct to it, and a very important and necessary adjunct, as I shall now endeavour to show, for on my so doing depends whether, from a wide and national point of view, we are right in localising a naval sea-going force at all. However superior our force may be, however skilled may be the strategic arrangement, however vigilant our admirals, history may repeat itself. An enemy may escape touch, he may escape notice, and it may be some time before his destination is known and his designs penetrated. We may feel confident he will be quickly followed, but his power for mischief, for a time at all events, would be great, and the difficulties attending a pursuing squadron are great compared to those experienced by one that is carrying into effect a well-devised pre-arranged scheme. This condition must not be overlooked. The power to avoid notice is much greater in 1866 than it was at the early part of this century. Winds, currents, and tides no longer restrict the movements of a fleet. Vessels a thousand miles away on a Monday are with you on a Friday. Blockades in the present day are not reliable, and the days of convoys, pure and simple, are gone.

While, therefore, we must admit that it is possible for a force to avoid those who try to prevent its attaining the open ocean, and that it may seek distant seas and places, and for a time, if not otherwise prevented, create much havoc; and, while we must also admit that the further from the focus a position is, the less advantageous it is as a station for a naval force on general national strategic grounds, for it depends on its ever even seeing an enemy, to his coming to it of his own accord, and to his having escaped the notice of others; and, besides, should the enemy go elsewhere in strength, the further off the position occupied is, the less likely is a force occupying it to be able to act in combination and in concert with its friends. Still, we also must admit that places of great wealth and importance, if not protected, provoke such enterprise on the part of an enemy as we are now particularly considering how best to frustrate.

I think it will be admitted, however far from the focus of war the positions may be, that, when they are of the importance and value, and when they possess the population of these colonies, there is good reason for removing a temptation to direct an attack on them from the Council Chamber of those who may be plotting against us, and to do so by providing a force that would be able to play an important part, whether the enemy came in strength or whether he sought to molest us by the action of swift cruisers.

With the development of great colonies the necessity for their defence year by year has become more and more apparent. New and important interests spring into existence in rapid series. Places that were of little importance, or that were even quite unknown to the world a few years ago, have now a very special value and importance attached to them. It is impossible to expect the taxpayer at Home to bear the whole cost of the defence of such great interests as exist in the colonies, scattered as they are in distant seas, and multiplying as they are with each cycle. Batteries and local defences alone extend their influence but a short distance. They cannot be indefinitely increased, even if it was wise to try to do so. The action of vessels of war at sea would tend to deny these waters as a cruising ground to our foes, and would do much to practically cover places that are not defended by forts or local forces. Without vessels of war we should be liable to be shut up in our own homes: the colonies would be isolated from the rest of the world. The taxpayer at Home pays approximately thirteen millions for the navy. He pays about thirty millions for the army and navy together. He pays it as an insurance for our existence as a nation.