

Geopolitics in Recent U.S. Military Professional Reading Lists

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Abstract: Professional military reading lists have existed for a long time in the U.S. military and in other national militaries. They are frequently updated and intended to enhance the professional knowledge of military professionals in areas ranging from cultural awareness, ethics, leadership, international relations, military history and military operations, and areas of expertise considered essential to successfully executing the operations of their military service branch. These lists are prepared by the leadership organizations of these armed services such as the Air Force Chief of Staff, U.S. Army's Chief of Staff, Chief of Naval Operations, and Marine Corps Commandant. Such readings are encouraged and are not prescriptive though they may be recommended for military personnel of various ranks. Their inclusion can often be controversial depending on existing political developments within U.S. politics. This work will examine recent geopolitically oriented works which have been included in U.S. professional military reading lists. They are not limited to books but may include podcasts. It is hoped this assessment will provide some indication of what leaders of U.S. military branches consider to be integral geopolitically oriented works for U.S. military personnel to be aware of in early 2023.

Keywords: Geopolitics, professional military reading lists, professional military education, national security information

A recent column from the Editor-in-Chief of *Military Review: The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army* contended that leading philosophers, general, and leaders emphasize the importance of warrior-scholars requiring the knowledge to lead, fight, and win wars. This assessment reinforced James Mattis' declaration: "If you haven't read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren't broad enough to sustain you." This article's author concluded by asserting:

To ensure we maintain an intellectual edge and guard against shallow leadership and hollow intellectualism, we cannot be satisfied with educational programs that meet minimum requirements of academic rigor. The challenge of developing strategic leaders for the twenty-first century, however, does not rest solely on the military institution. As professionals, we have a personal responsibility to meet the intellectual demands of the future operational environment. If we truly believe that people are our biggest asset and soldiers our most lethal weapons system, we have a personal duty to achieve cognitive superiority over our adversary. Meeting these obligations requires reading above and beyond the requirements of any military schoolhouse.¹

Extensive literature on professional military history reading lists can be found by searching multiple databases including *Air University Library Index to Military Periodicals*, *America: History and Life*, *Google Scholar*, *Historical Abstracts*, and *Library Literature and Information Science Full Text*.² Some of this literature may be as granularly focused as the professional reading of a historically prominent U.S. military personality.³ This genre may take global holistic focuses on military history and professional military operations in multiple eras and cultures, gaining enhanced situational awareness of the enemies you are fighting, as well as focusing on soldier's roles as ambassadorial representatives of their countries in global regions requiring their military presence, and examples of how military thinking may be reflected in individual nations military journals.⁴

Inclusion of materials in professional military reading lists can be controversial depending on domestic U.S. political controversies. This was reflected in a June 15, 2021 House Armed Services Committee hearing on the Navy Department's Fiscal Year 2022 budget request. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Gilday testified before this committee with questioning by members including concerns expressed by multiple members that the Navy's professional reading list included Ibrahim X. Kendi's *How to be an Anti-Racist*. Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-CO) contended Kendi's work argued that America was completely corrupted by racial prejudices and asked Gilday how exposing naval personnel to the idea that they

are either oppressors or oppressed and that current active discrimination is needed to compensate for past discrimination improves naval readiness and lethality for great power competition. Gilday responded by contending that racism could not be swept under the rug, that he didn't support all of Kendi's contentions, and that he believed sailors should have to understand why China and Russia could be potential dangers to the U.S.⁵

Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN) followed up by asserting Kendi's claim that capitalism was essentially racist and asked Gilday if he considered advocating for the destruction of capitalism was racist. Gilday acknowledged reading this book and admitted that there is racism in the U.S. Navy. Banks then asked Gilday if he believed that racial attitudes in the U.S. Navy increase or decrease naval morale, cohesion, or naval recruiting. Gilday responded saying the Navy would be better form having open conversations about racism.⁶

Air Force Readings

Air Force professional military readings are prepared by the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force. Examples of assessments of this service branch's professional readings lists may be published in Air University's *Air and Space Power Journal*.⁷ Works incorporated in recent and historical versions of the Air Force Chief of Staff's professional reading list include:

H. Andrew Schwarz and Mark F. Cancian. *The Truth of the Matter: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan*. Podcast. (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

Wargame exercise created for a Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan. Featured scenarios run 24 times with the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan defeating a Chinese invasion and maintaining Taiwanese independence. This occurred with the U.S. and its allies losing dozens of ships, hundreds of aircraft, and tens of thousands of military personnel.⁸

Chris Miller. *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*. New York: Scribner's, 2022.

This work stresses how microchips have become the scarce resource the modern world depends on. Items as varied as cars, the electric grid, microwaves, missiles, smartphones, and the stock market run on semiconductors. Besides the

U.S., countries in locales as varied as China, Europe, Taiwan, and South Korea are in a competitive race to build semiconductors which may challenge U.S. economic and military hegemony.⁹

John “Slick” Baum, Justin Bronk, Heather Penney, and Michael Kingry. *Episode 110: Russian Airpower in Ukraine: Lessons for the West*. Podcast,(Arlington, VA: Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, 2023).

This podcast challenges many assumptions about the Russian air force and what a modern air campaign looks like against advanced systems and a determined enemy. It contends many pundits are drawing the exact wrong conclusion from this fight. This episode explores the strategies and tactics the combatants are employing, the hardware they are bringing to the fight, and what it means for the wider war. It examines what lessons can be learned by NATO and the United States as war rages in Eastern Europe and adversaries around the globe evaluate the Western response¹⁰

The Economist. *The Prince: The Search for Xi Jinping*. Podcast. London: The Economist, 2022-2023.

Eight part podcast describing and analyzing the Chinese leader’s life and career.¹¹

Rush Doshi. *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Replace American Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Examines Chinese primary sources to scrutinize Beijing’s long and methodical plan to displace American power through sequential displacement. Contends that Chinese grand strategy is driven by events such as the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2016 U.S. elections, and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. The author contends the U.S. should respond to China asymmetrically by undermining Chinese ambitions and strengthening American order without competing dollar-for-dollar, ship-for-ship, and loan-for-loan.¹²

Andrew F. Krepinivich and Barry D. Watts. *Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

Biography of the long-time leader of the Defense Department's Office of Net Assessment covering his multidecadal influence on U.S. national security strategy and policymaking encompassing the Soviet Union and China.¹³

Army Readings

Army professional military readings are produced by the U.S. Army Chief of Staff and include:¹⁴

United States Army. *Field Manual (FM) 7-0 Training*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2021.

A manual aspiring to prepare the Army to compete, respond to crisis, win in conflict, and consolidate gains during large-scale combat while gaining ground in a multi-domain environment. Applies to joint and multi-national doctrine and strives to ensure that decisions by U.S. commanders, staff, and subordinates apply to U.S. national, international, and host-state laws and regulations.¹⁵

Colin Gray. *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy*. Lincoln: NE: Potomac Books, 2009.

Maxims grouped according to five clusters. "War and Peace" tackles the larger issues of strategic history that drive the demand for the services of strategic thought and practice. "Strategy" presses further, into the realm of strategic behavior, and serves as a bridge between the political focus of part one and the military concerns that follow. "Military Power and Warfare" turns to the pragmatic business of military performance: operations, tactics, and logistics. ur, "Security and Insecurity" examines why strategy is important, including a discussion of the nature, dynamic character, and functioning of world politics. Finally, "History and the Future" is meant to help strategists better understand the processes of historical change.¹⁶

Peter Zeihan. *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder*.

Zeihan examines how the hard rules of geography are eroding the American commitment to free trade; how much of the planet is aging into a mass retirement that will enervate markets and capital supplies, and how the American economy is the only developed economy approaching energy independence.

Argues that these factors are overturning the global system, ushering in a new order, and concludes geography will matter more than ever in a deglobalizing world and enhance America's geography position.¹⁷

Hew Strachan. *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Strachan contends that recent wars fought by the U.S. and Britain result from a fundamental misunderstanding and application of strategy. He argues post-2001 wars have not been "new" and that the British and Americans need to adopt a more historical approach to contemporary strategy to identify what is really changing in their war fighting. Strachan also insists that if war is to fulfill policy aims, then decision makers must first understand war and drawing more on historical lessons to understand the contemporary strategic environment.¹⁸

Hal Brands. *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Examines global changes and U.S. policy from the late 1979's-early 1990's through the Cold War featuring the rise of globalization, democratic advance, and the emergence of Islamic extremism and international terrorism. Argues that structural changes in the international system interacted with strategies pursued by the Carter, Reagan, and George H.W Bush Administrations to usher in reinvigorated and unprecedented American primacy.¹⁹

David Kilcullen. *Blood Year: The Unravelling of Western Counterterrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Provides a view of the current situation in the Middle East while analyzing how the U.S. and the West ended up in such adverse circumstances. This contrasted with the more positive situation in 2008 when it appeared the U.S. might achieve relatively desirable results in Iraq in 2008. The 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, that country's Shi'ite president cutting the Sunnis out of the power structure allowing Iranian influence to grow. This period also saw the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which was even more radical than Al-Qaeda and aspired to establish its own state and how former Iraqi Ba'athist military officers played key roles in facilitating ISIS' success²⁰

Marine Corps Readings

The Marine Corps Professional Reading list is compiled by the Marine Corps Commandant. Current categories include Commandant's Choice, Profession of Arms, Innovation, Leadership, Strategy, Foundational encompassing recommended readings for all Marines and for various Marine Corps rank classifications including Entry Level Enlisted, Entry Level Officer, Primary Level Enlisted, Primary Level Officer, Career Level Enlisted, Career Level Officer, Intermediate Level Enlisted, Intermediate Level Officer, Senior Level Enlisted, and Senior Level Officer. Recommended podcasts, periodicals, and discussion guides are also included.²¹ Evaluations of these reading lists and their utility appear periodically in Marine Corps publications.²²

Geopolitical oriented recommended readings in this list's strategy section include:

Wayne P. Hughes Jr., and Robert P. Girrer. *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations*. 3rd ed. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018.

Examines battle tactics at sea from the age of fighting sail to the present emphasizing trend constants and variables. Demonstrates importance of combat data including how hitting and damage rates and maneuvering are conducted to achieve operational advantage over multiple centuries. The current edition stresses how emerging advances in unmanned vehicles, artificial intelligence, cyber warfare in peace and war, and other information war effects are changing how battles at sea will be fought and won.²³

Robert D. Kaplan. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Stresses that 21st century geopolitical focus must examine countries in "Monsoon Asia" including India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia, Burma (Myanmar), Oman, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Tanzania. Kaplan maintains this region has become critical to American power and that battles for democracy, energy independence, and religious freedom will be won or lost here. An additional contention is that U.S. foreign policy must concentrate here to remain relevant with demonstrations of how population growth, climatic developments, and extremist politics impact this region and make it impossible for the U.S. to ignore.²⁴

Sandy Woodward with Patrick Robinson. *One Hundred Days: The Memoir of the Battle Group Commander*. 2nd edition. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.

Written by the Battle Group Commander of the British military task force to retake the Falkland Islands from Argentina during 1982, this work described how this 100 day long mission accomplished its objectives. This included sailing 8,000 miles with no obvious air or land advantage into a difficult station while withstanding the loss of ships and men to ultimately retake the Falkland Islands.²⁵

Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes. *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*. 2nd ed. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018.

Possessing Asian expertise and the ability to exploit Chinese language resources, these authors contend Chinese sea power will affect U.S. maritime strategy in Asia. Yoshihara and Holmes contend China is engaging in a sustained challenge to U.S. primacy in maritime Asia by contending that Alfred Thayer Mahan's sea power theories are popular with the Chinese. This analysis also examines the People's Liberation Army Navy operation concepts, tactics, capabilities, and missile force. Their conclusion is China is posing a great challenge to the U.S. strategic position and that the U.S. must respond with serious competitive efforts.²⁶

Podcasts are also included in recommended Marine Corps professional development with various examples listed.²⁷ Examples of these podcasts include Sea Control (CIMSEC) from the Center for International Maritime Security which includes 210 podcasts as of May 12, 2023 with representative titles including *Sea Control: The Space Force and the Coast Guard*, and *American Sea Power at a Crossroads*,²⁸ Net Assessment: War on the Rocks featuring *Technology, Defense, and American-Chinese Competition* and *Better Burden Sharing With Allies*,²⁹ and the Wall Street Journal's The Future of Everything featuring podcasts such as

*Melting Ice and Underseas Cables: How the Arctic is Getting Fast Internet and Encore: Beyond Silicon?: The New Materials Charting the Future of Microchips*³⁰

The Marine Corps Commandant Professional Reading List also includes a discussion guide for Marines to follow while reading or listening to works on this list. This guide strives to encourage Marines to think and discuss the works they read or listen to, develop better insights into Marines thought processes, learn new ways of accomplishing tasks, or discovering a different strategy to consider. Discussion leaders should strive to promote continuous conversation among Marines while leading to a better sense of history, identity, and purpose. Examples of questions on this discussion guide include:

What made you want to read it?

Did it lead up to your expectations? Why? Why not?

Did this book inspire you to do more research on this subject? Why? Why not?

What evidence does the author use to support their ideas?

Does the author offer solutions to the problems raised in the book? How probable is their success? Can you think of additional solutions?

Have you read the author's other books? Can you discern a similarity (in theme, writing style, structure etc.) between them or are they completely different?

Why should Marines read this book?³¹

Navy Readings

The U.S. Navy's Professional Reading Program is compiled by the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). It seeks to mix multiple writing genres including fiction, non-fiction, strategy, management, and technology. Program objectives include developing a warfighting culture and learning along with supporting Sailors professional and personal development beyond their primary rating. Such readings aspire to accelerating warfighting advantage contending that a learning, adapting, and fast improving navy will be the most successful. Program creators maintain that Sailors with an independent quest for knowledge through reading and information sharing will be particularly relevant in an era of strategic competition.³²

Naval emphasis on reading's importance is also stressed in individual issues of the *Naval War College Review* with each issue featuring a *Reflections on Reading* column. Topics addressed in recent issues include assessments of works on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II including Japanese development of bat and balloon bombs, the CNO acknowledging that some professional reading list works may be controversial and do not represent Navy endorsement of those works, the experiences of prisoners of war in Vietnam, and drones at war.³³

Current geopolitical oriented works on the CNO's reading list include:

Bruce D. Jones. *To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers*. New York: Scribner's 2021.

This work notes that oceans were how nations battled for global supremacy for multiple centuries. It stresses that during the nuclear age, air power and missile systems dominated security with the U.S. economy being primarily driven by domestic production including trucking and railways crisscrossing the continent serving as primary commercial transit nodes. This has changed with 90% of global commerce and most energy trade being seaborne. This work journeys to modern ports and naval bases while seeking to demonstrate that geopolitical struggles over climate, economic dominance, and military power are occurring above, within, and below the world's oceans.³⁴

James R. Holmes. *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019.

This work is focused on junior seafarers, individuals making decisions affecting the sea services, and those educating seafarers and decision makers. It introduces readers to key theoretical ideas shaping how national leaders and commanders make and execute maritime strategy in times of peace and war.³⁵

Michael A. McDevitt. *China as a 21st Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020.

Begins by exploring why China is seeking to become a major maritime power with the author exploring the strategic rationale behind Xi Jinping's goals to become a great maritime power and a world-class armed force by 2050. McDevitt contends Beijing's reliance on foreign trade and overseas interests such as the Belt and Road Strategy have produced concerns in China's military about its

overseas vulnerabilities and maritime lifelines. This has resulted in the PLA Navy evolving from a “near seas” focused force to one with a global reach which is taking incremental steps to enhance its capacity. The author also assesses what might happen if Beijing decides to attack Taiwan and how the U.S. Navy’s Seventh Fleet and Fifth Air Force might respond to this.³⁶

Mary Serotte. *America, Russia, and the Making of a Post-Cold War Stalemate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

Shows how the U.S. overcame Russian resistance in the 1990s to expand NATO to over 900 million people. Contends U.S. tactics undermined what could have been a partnership between the U.S. and Russia with Vladimir Putin claiming NATO would not move “not one inch” toward the East with Putin justifying renewed confrontation as proper for what he sees as improper NATO deployment of military infrastructure to Russia’s border.³⁷

Conclusion

U.S. military professional reading lists are aspirations for what the leadership of individual military branches think their personnel should be aware of in terms of desirable personal behavioral attributes and historical, current, and emerging subjects they may have to address in their future professional service. These lists can impact domestic U.S. politics and the history and politics of countries where they may be stationed and may have to conduct military operations in. One U.S. military service assessment of these lists contends works addressing social, economic, and political factors may bring relevant subjects into focus and provide a framework for geographic analysis and decision-making when operating in a new environment.³⁸

These lists are restricted by their being insufficient ways to enforce what service personnel read and whether it is possible to determine if personnel have read and gained enhanced understanding from these readings in areas such as aviation, counterinsurgency, cyber warfare and security, regional and cultural studies, and strategic thinking.³⁹

It is highly desirable for American military personnel to have geopolitical understanding of operational issues they may currently confront or may confront in future operational activity. One critique has expressed concern that the U.S.

military is “to busy to learn.” That is a frightening concept, because the crucial balance between the will to accomplish the mission and the intellect to do so smartly and at the least cost in lives is in jeopardy of becoming unbalanced.”...”steps to remedy this situation because the history of military innovation and effectiveness in the last century suggests a correlation between battlefield performance and how seriously military institutions regarded officer education.”⁴⁰

Consequently, all U.S. military branches should include classical geopolitical readings and podcasts in their professional military reading lists since the cultures, histories, physical environments, politics, and societies of countries where the U.S. is engaged in friendly or hostile military activity will inevitably influence the success or failure of our operations in these geographical areas. Those adhering to classical geopolitical world views should be aware of the professional military reading lists of the U.S. and other countries and actively encouraging the leadership of these militaries to incorporate classical geopolitical perspectives into the reading and listening recommendations for their military personnel. It is also possible that emerging military readers of classical geopolitical works may incorporate the lessons derived from these works into future military operational leadership activity and accomplishments or make their own intellectual contributions through scholarship such as Princeton University Press’ *Makers of Modern Strategy* series.⁴¹

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³²M.M. Gilday, *CNO Professional Reading Program*, (Washington, DC: Chief of Naval Operations, 2023): 1; <https://www.navy.mil/CNO-Professional-Reading-Program/>; Accessed May 16, 2023.

³³See John E. Jackson, "Reflections on Reading," *Naval War College Review*, 73 (3)(Summer 2020): 169-171; <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8122&context=nwc-review>; Accessed May 16, 2023; Ibid., "Reflections on Reading," *Naval War College Review*, 74 (2)(Spring 2021): 184; <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8182&context=nwc-review>; Accessed May 16, 2023; Ibid., "Reflections on Reading: Drones in War in 2022...and Beyond," *Naval War College Review*, 75 (2)(Spring 2022): 198-200; <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8266&context=nwc-review>; Accessed May 16, 2023; and Ibid., "Reflections on Reading: A Vietnam Tapestry," 76 (1)(Winter 2023): 169-171; <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8323&context=nwc-review>; Accessed May 16, 2023.

³⁴⁵<https://www.navy.mil/CNO-Professional-Reading-Program/>; Accessed May 16, 2023.

³⁵⁵<https://www.navy.mil/CNO-Professional-Reading-Program/>; Accessed May 16, 2023.

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³⁷<https://www.navy.mil/CNO-Professional-Reading-Program/>; Accessed May 16, 2023.

³⁸Munson, 51.

³⁹Petitgout, 44-45.

⁴⁰Mullen III, 50.

⁴¹See *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, Edward Mead Earl, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943); *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); and the newest edition to this triumvirate *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, Hal Brands, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).