The strategic value of Hawaii was evident a quarter-century ago, when I visited Pearl Harbor as a midshipman in the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson. The US Navy was building up toward 600 ships; its Pacific Fleet had an overbearing Soviet Far East Fleet to contend with.

The navy could do none of this without island bases connecting the US to maritime Asia, no matter how many gee-whiz warships and aircraft it built.

Islands like Hawaii support the exercise of US sea power far from US shores. In turn, US sea power underwrites free navigation for commercial shipping in Asia, assuring that goods traveling by sea reach their users unmolested. That's why, when I returned to Pearl Harbor late last month, the base had lost neither its bustle nor its sense of purpose — although land campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq now obscure the navy's day-to-day upkeep of the global system.

Still, Hawaii's strategic importance now depends more on deft alliance diplomacy than it did in the 1980s, when the US military still enjoyed unfettered access to Philippine bases at the juncture of the East China and South China seas. Today, there's just Japan to anchor the far terminus of the US base network. If the US were denied access to Japanese bases, Hawaii would lose much of its importance for the first time in over a century.

Many things drew foreigners to the Hawaiian archipelago in the decades after 1778, when Captain James Cook dropped anchor off Kauai. New England missionaries came starting in 1820, intent on saving souls. Planters followed later in the 19th century, hoping to make their fortunes raising crops in the rich volcanic soil. But in geopolitics, as in real estate, it's all about location, location, location. Geography prompted the US to annex the islands and, ultimately, admit them to statehood.

Writing in 1893, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, the US' Copernicus or "evangelist" of sea power, offered a sharp analysis of the Hawaiian chain's geopolitical worth. Unlike their sail-driven forebears, steamships could defy winds and currents, but they also demanded fuel in bulk.

Mahan said that a US with commercial interests in Asia must forge a "chain" of island bases to support the transpacific voyages of steam-propelled merchantmen and their protectors, armored warships.

He said "the Hawaiian group possesses unique importance" among the candidates for Pacific bases, "not from its intrinsic commercial value, but from its favorable position for maritime and military control."

The open sea resembled a featureless plain, with few important geographic assets. The rarer these features, the more valuable. If there was only one island or archipelago, it held matchless strategic value.

Hawaii met that description. It occupied the center of a circle whose radius equaled the distance from San Francisco to Honolulu, some 3,860km. It sat midway between the US west coast and Asia's "second island chain," which runs from northern Japan southward through New Guinea.

British vessels transiting between Canada and New Zealand or Australia routinely called at Honolulu, which lay along their course.

Public works would soon amplify Hawaii's importance for US maritime power. Once engineers finished digging a canal across the Central American Isthmus, a new sea route would spring into being. Ships steaming from Atlantic seaports to China or Japan would transit through the Caribbean Sea rather than circumnavigating South America. They too would pass near Hawaii, making Honolulu an ideal way station.

In keeping with Mahanian logic, US strategists like Theodore Roosevelt coveted sole possession of the archipelago. Rival sea powers Japan, Britain and Germany had voiced interest in acquiring some or all of the islands. Potential foes, it appeared, could obtain bases off the US west coast. This would not do. Washington must extend US rule to Hawaii to foreclose this latent naval threat.

However compelling Mahan's brief for acquiring the islands, his appeals remained abstract until 1898. Anti-imperialist president Grover Cleveland scotched an annexation bid in 1893, before the Spanish-American War concentrated minds.

The US became a Pacific power overnight after wresting the Philippines from Spain. The US needed an island bridge to its new Pacific empire. Accordingly, Congress annexed Hawaii at the behest of president William McKinley.

Now, as then, Mahan's logic is irresistible. Pearl Harbor will remain essential as long as the US remains an Asian sea power — a status the US has no intention of surrendering. But unless Washington manages its alliance with Tokyo wisely, Hawaii could become a bridge to nowhere.

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