

HALFORD MACKINDER'S IDEAS TODAY

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There have always been politicians who considered the cornerstone of their foreign policy efforts to be Halford Mackinder's imperative about the need to control the Pivot area (or the Heartland) in order to rule the world. Today, some countries are still guided by the key tenets of this theory in their foreign policy pursuits, even though the idea has been revised by a number of thinkers, its author included.

At one time, Mackinder postulated that the maritime nations and the people of the marginal regions [which Nicholas J. Spykman later called Eurasia's "Rimland"] should do their best to contain those living in the Heartland. This perfectly suited the realities of the bipolar world and largely promoted the ideology of NATO and other postwar blocs (SENTO, ASEAN).

Today, however, it seems that these geopolitical postulations can no longer serve as a sound theoretical basis for explaining the current trends obvious in world politics. It might have seemed that after splitting the continental monolith and turning the fragments into friendly states, the maritime nations had defused the British geopolitician's key theoretical propositions about the Heartland's invulnerability and eternal opposition between the sea and land powers.

However, the very fact that the sea powers have moved into the heart of the Eurasian continent shows that they find it extremely important. The Atlantic powers are out to spread their control to the most distant (from them) corners of the world, such as Afghanistan and Central Asia. In other words, West European politicians are fully aware that, according to Mackinder, in order to rule the world they should gain control over the Pivot area. In 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote: "For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia."¹ According to him, the importance of Eurasia is created by the fact that it is home to 75 percent of the world's population and that upon and beneath it lies the larger part of the world's physical wealth. This vast territory

¹ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 30.

accounts for about 60 percent of the world's GNP and controls about 75 percent of the world's proven energy resources.

In the 20th century, an interest in Mackinder's geopolitical conceptions was rekindled regularly. Judging by the persistence with which NATO is pushing into Eastern Europe and Central Asia, one of these bouts of interest occurred in the post-Soviet era. The NATO leaders, at least, are acting in full conformity with what the British geopolitician said at one time: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; ... who rules the Heartland commands the world."

Nicholas J. Spykman tried to disprove the theory by saying that even if the Heartland were a geographical reality, first, it has lost its unassailability to strategic aviation and other state-of-the-art weapons, and, second, contrary to what Mackinder asserted, this vast territory failed to become one of the world's economically most developed regions. He insisted that the outcome of both world wars was decided not in the Heartland zone or in the struggle for it, but along the coasts and in the Rimland. Spykman, therefore, concluded that world hegemony does not depend on control over Eastern Europe, but, contrary to Mackinder, maintained that he "who rules the Rimland commands the World."

In fact, his theory confirms what Mackinder postulated: both world wars were waged for the Rimland in order to gain control over the Heartland. He who rules the Rimland can gain control over the Heartland. We should never forget that Russia, a country in the very heart of Eurasia, had colonies along its periphery and worked hard to reach the seacoasts. This would have allowed it to fully join the world economic system. It never aspired, however, to control the territories of the sea powers—in fact, it never needed them. Outlets to the sea made Russia self-sufficient. To a certain extent, the Soviet geopolitical bloc collapsed when the Soviet Union succumbed to the temptation to spread its ideology throughout the world. Overstrained, it lost control over the adjacent territories.

When analyzed, the foreign policies of the Atlantic states, the United States in particular, reveal that these countries are urged to constantly extend their sphere of influence in Eurasia, as well as elsewhere. For instance, after establishing its ideological domination and economic influence in Central and then in Eastern Europe, the U.S. is trying to strike root in Central Asia. Permanent expansion is the foreign policy cornerstone of the today's only hegemonic state and is explained, among other things, by the sea powers' mindset.

Today we are witnessing continued pressure by the Sea (sea powers) on the Land (Eurasian countries). According to the classics of geopolitics, the Sea mindset presupposes there is a space that produces nothing and lives on piracy and exploitation of the Land, which derives its riches from the subsurface and the earth's natural resources. Aware of its barrenness, the Sea has no choice but to reproduce itself by plundering the Land. To make it more vulnerable, the Sea tries to split the monolith of the Land, which gives rise to the tactics of the Atlantic civilization obvious in postwar European dynamics. During the course of two wars, World War II and the Cold War, the Atlantic world engulfed first Central and then Eastern Europe by turning them into a friendly oceanic subsystem. It Westernized the countries within these two regions.

The same is going on in the APR where, according to Russian researcher Alexander Panarin, oceanic strategists have found another monolith target—China—which they are seeking to fragment in a similar way.

The "piratical" mindset is targeted at other countries. At home, the "robbers of the sea" have to stick to the principles of normal social existence; they have to develop an economy that produces rather than appropriates. What is more, after returning home, the "robbers of the sea" don puritanic garb for the simple reason that life according to the rules of the Sea is self-destructive.

In the context of social existence, the Sea is a secondary phenomenon and can live by serving and/or exploiting the Land. Alexander Panarin put this in the following way: "The process of Westernization is not merely an onslaught of the Atlantic Sea on the fortresses of the Eurasian continent;

this is also an attempt to replace the spiritual vertical rooted in the culture of man as a supra-natural creature with the utilitarian-pragmatic horizontal.² No wonder the process developing along the latitudes connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific stopped at Russia's borders. All attempts to Westernize Russia and Central Asia (the continental heartland) failed for the simple reason that these attempts succeed where the Sea mindset prevails.

Condoleezza Rice, who was recently appointed as U.S. Secretary of State, is absolutely convinced: "America's pursuit of the national interest will create conditions that promote freedom, markets, and peace."³ In the heart of the continent, however, the values imposed by the West are hardly welcome; they have created a multitude of problems, such as corruption, and stirred up extremist trends.

Zbigniew Brzezinski recognized that American influence is too weak in the heart of Eurasia, and he explains this as follows: "The very scale and diversity of Eurasia, as well as the power of some of its states, limits the depth of American influence and the scope of control over the course of events. That megacontinent is just too large, too populous, culturally too varied, and composed of too many historically ambitious and politically energetic states to be compliant toward even the most economically successful and politically preeminent global power."⁴ He has obviously agreed that Washington's aim—world order American-style—is a very difficult task, yet the White House believes that it could be resolved on condition that the U.S. "places a premium on geostrategic skill, on the careful, selective, and very deliberate deployment of America's resources on the huge Eurasian chessboard."⁵ This is what is going on: American military bases are placed in the strategically most important points of Eurasia, which allows the world hegemon to control developments in the continent's larger part and to prevent the appearance of a potential rival. America's fear of another rival is fed, among other things, by its awareness that it does not have sufficient energy sources of its own to deal with global issues. This has made Eurasia, a source of energy, a sphere of Washington's national interests.

Today, the geopolitical accents of Mackinder's theory have shifted: it is no longer enough to rule parts of the Eurasian continent to command the World—control over the entire continent serves as the basis of global domination.

We can doubt Mackinder's theory, but no one can deny that, its debatable nature notwithstanding, it is not merely used—it serves as the foreign policy foundation for the world's leading powers. Otherwise, we would not have been watching the sea powers push into the heart of the Eurasian continent with a zeal that can hardly be explained by counterterrorist strategies alone.

² A.S. Panarin, *Politologia*, Moscow, 2000, p. 409.

³ C. Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1, January/February 2000: available at [<http://www.foreignaffairs.org>].

⁴ Z. Brzezinski, op. cit., p. 35.

⁵ Ibid., p. 49.