

MACKINDER'S LEGACY: WAS IT A PROPHECY?

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Today the planet seems to be brimming with surprises—it is too changeable and too unpredictable. The man in the street, as well as people well-versed in the world order theory cannot help wondering whether there is a system in the world able to regulate the relations among all entities.

This is not a novel feature of our times: in the past, too, thinkers pondered over questions of world order and relations between the key members of the world community and the members of secondary importance. Halford Mackinder, who is well known to the world as one of the founders of geopolitics, was among these thinkers. I am not going to discuss his numerous merits in the field of political geography—I am going to discuss his heritage and use his major “geographical pivot of history” theory as applied to the present foreign policy realities of Kyrgyzstan, which cannot, and should not, be divorced from its Central Asian neighbors, the CIS countries, China, and the United States.

It should be said that one of the key ideas of a man born nearly 150 years ago has found a new lease on life in the 21st century in light of the new relations between the “key and secondary” actors. This happened not because he dotted all the “i’s” in the world politics of his time. On the contrary, after describing the process that led to the present intertwining of international relations and presenting practical recommendations on how to untwine them, he offered his own forecast of the future of interstate relations and bequeathed a number of questions to future generations. Who is destined to become “ruler of the world?” By way of an answer, he hinted that the future leader of world politics would use geographic location, one of the key factors in any state’s destiny, as its trump card. Having described the central location (which he called the Heartland) as geographically the most advantageous, he posed another, no less important question: which country can be described as the Heartland, a position that gives it considerable advantages over

others?¹ And he provided the answer: the central location is a relative concept. A state that manages to dominate the central country will acquire all the advantages of the Heartland. This obviously brings up another consideration: he was probably referring to a country's political weight, rather than to its geographic location, that is, to its ability either to capitalize on its advantages independently, or to remain a dependent country even when holding the trump card, yet lacking adequate resources for its own protection. In other words, it is less important to be located in the Heartland—it is enough to command political (and foreign policy) resources to dominate the center.

Mackinder, however, failed to specify the address at which the Pivot area could be found. There is still no agreement on it today, while numerous academics are busy sticking this label on their countries.² This is a natural and completely understandable desire. For example, a prominent Russian academic Alexander Dugin believes that in geopolitical terms Russia can be described as the Pivot area.³ I cannot agree with him. This might have been true when the Soviet Union was still alive and included the Central Asian republics, which, I am convinced, are the Pivot area. A look at the map of Central Asia shows that Kyrgyzstan is the Heartland of this vast region. I can agree that its closest neighbors—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—can also be described as the Heartland, yet the interest displayed by the regional (Russia) and world (the U.S.) leaders in our republic explained why I was going to concentrate on Kyrgyzstan. Someone may say that the country is not centrally located and that American and Russian military bases were deployed there because of its weakness, which impaired regional and, hence, world security.

Before taking sides let us go back to Mackinder who pointed out that the Pivot states might (or might not) grow stronger. If we look at Central Asia as the Pivot area and, consequently, describe it as the Heartland, we can discuss possible close integration between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and others. I am convinced that today there are certain factors that interfere with the Heartland's internal strengthening.

There are external factors: the Soviet Union's disintegration created political freedom and also caused the former Soviet republics' economic ruin. This fully applies to the Central Asian countries. Today, a sustainable economy is the key to the domestic and foreign policies of independent states.⁴ Economic instability, uneven development, and different approaches to economic regulation practices in the Central Asian countries inflate the already strong impact of the states of the "Inner" and "Outer" crescents. By the "Inner Crescent" I mean Russia and China, while the U.S., Japan, Turkey, and others belong to the "Outer Crescent." This impact is gradually growing stronger and takes the form of competing investments, credits, and grants. I am convinced that the investment flow is a sure sign that both crescents are obviously interested in the area, which supports Mackinder's forecast that any country which commands the Heartland will rule the World.⁵ This alone can explain the consistent interest in Kyrgyzstan.

If Kyrgyzstan is a strategically important point of the Heartland, we should pay particular attention to the growing American, Japanese, Turkish, German, and Chinese investments in various spheres of its economy. Let us discuss China as a strategically important neighbor; the relations between the Chinese and the Kyrgyz are rooted in hoary antiquity. Until the 20th century, the Celestial Kingdom persisted in its attempts to join the lands of the Kyrgyz to its territory. The territorial wars between the two nations reached their peak in the 17th-19th centuries⁶ and stopped when the Russian Empire came to the territory. No wonder China was one of the first countries

¹ See: "Halford Mackinder. Geograficheskaya os istorii," in: A. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, Moscow, 1997, pp. 110-111.

² See: *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³ See: A. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, Moscow, 2000, pp. 45-46.

⁴ See: P.A. Tsygankov, *Teoriya mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy*, Moscow, 2003, p. 22.

⁵ See: "Halford Mackinder. Geograficheskaya os istorii," pp. 114-117.

⁶ See: N.M. Omarov, *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya v epokhu global'noy razvitiya*, Bishkek, 2003, p. 79.

to recognize Kyrgyzstan as an independent state on 27 December, 1991 and established diplomatic relations with it on 5 January, 1992. Immediately after that Bishkek and Beijing became bogged down in border issues which demanded settlement, delimitation, and demarcation.⁷ (The state border of Kyrgyzstan is 4,767 km long, 1,072 km of which constitutes the Chinese stretch.) Despite prolonged negotiations and several agreements, the border issues have not yet been settled.⁸ We can say that the public has not yet reconciled itself to Bishkek's decision to transfer 30 percent of the disputable territories in the Bedel Pass (Uzongu-Kuush) area to China.⁹ Certain political forces in Kyrgyzstan are convinced that this is the beginning of final territorial delimitation in favor of China.

In 2001, these countries signed an agreement on building a stretch of the transcontinental railway to Europe, which would cross Central Asia in general and the larger part of Kyrgyzstan in particular.¹⁰ The project is considered economically highly promising. It seems, however, that so far our economy is a consumer rather than a producer: according to the latest information, 85 percent of consumer goods arrive in Kyrgyzstan from China, because of which local producers are forced to compete with Chinese imports. This negatively affects our economy. To my mind, the railway will not help Kyrgyzstan develop; it will offer China a chance to consolidate its economic domination over our country. Our concern is aggravated by the fact that the political leaders of our country are much weaker than their colleagues in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan when it comes to control over external migration and internal stability. In other words, similar projects realized jointly by a developed and a developing country may assume political dimensions and may endanger the weaker state's independence.

Even though Mackinder never wrote that the Heartland might shift to any particular country, China's economic advance and its persistent, even if "soft," efforts to impose its conditions on the developing Central Asian republics, including Kyrgyzstan, suggest that the Heartland might shift and is shifting toward one of the key "Inner Crescent" states, China. In any case, there is the impression that China is striving to become the Heartland by swallowing, on the sly, the current Heartland by capitalizing on its political and economic instability. We should bear in mind that China is not alone: there are other countries that have already occupied the central niche. The American military base near Bishkek, which is there indefinitely, and Russia's identical military base in Kant ensure external stability even though "there is no such thing as a free lunch." So far, the public and the establishment are showing no signs of irritation over the simultaneous presence of two strong states on our territory. Their protection is indispensable when there is no political and economic stability. Time alone will tell how the situation will unfold.

The external factor consists of two components.

First, there is the economic influence. It has not so far been fully developed in Central Asia: the local countries are only just developing their normative and legal base and taking their first steps in the right direction. In fact, the ability to shape the domestic policies of the recipient countries is the final aim of economic influence, which is achieved through investments. External influence can be realized by means of certain political groups inside the state, in which case an obvious bias inside the country toward one of the foreign investors may split the political front at home. If there are several simultaneous attempts by several investor countries to promote their interests in the recipient country, political dissent may develop into a civil war.

Political influence is another component. In the case of Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan as its part, it is officially based on the international counterterrorist efforts. In the wake of 9/11, Kyrgyzstan of-

⁷ See: *Istoria kyrgyzov i Kyrgyzstana*, Bishkek, 2000, p. 67.

⁸ See: A. Akaev, *Pamiatnoe desiatiletie*, Bishkek, 2001, p. 104.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ See: N.M. Omarov, op. cit.

ficially joined the counterterrorist coalition.¹¹ Russia and China had an ambiguous response to the deployment of the U.S.-led Joint Rapid Deployment Force in Kyrgyzstan. The Treaty on Eternal Friendship, Allied Relationships and Partnership Moscow and Bishkek signed in July 2000 can be interpreted as Russia's clear statement of its interests in the region. It is trying hard to restore its key role in Central Asia, not only because the number of Russian speakers in Kyrgyzstan is relatively large, but also because it wants to strengthen its position in "historical" areas and ensure its security in the south-eastern sector.

America's position is more ambiguous. Washington is obviously exploiting its "support of democracy and protection of human rights" and other slogans to conceal its true foreign policy aims. Like any other country, the United States needs stability at home. Today, because of globalization, stability at home depends on the superpower's external position, which makes developing countries (such as Kyrgyzstan) an important strongpoint of self-defense and a means of extending its influence to the "vacated" territories. America is not scared by the need to deal with a traditional society, political and economic instability, and irresponsible bureaucrats, because of whom investments designed for economic development disappear without trace.

At the same time, foreign factors have a different effect on the politics and economy of the Central Asian countries, therefore my version of future developments cannot be equally applied to all of them.

Here are several internal factors that will not allow the Heartland to strengthen from the inside. They are also rooted in the past.

1. The current border disagreements are caused by the need to delineate and demarcate the borders among the Central Asian countries. Back in 1924, the Central Asian Liquidation Committee set up an ethnic and territorial delimitation commission. After 15 sittings, the committee presented Moscow with its plan of border delimitation.¹² Even though most of the representatives of the Central Asian republics disagreed with this alternative, the Soviet leaders approved it. This is what gave rise to the present territorial claims.¹³ No decision in favor of one side is possible. There is the risk of ethnic conflicts in the region; the unsettled border issues are causing numerous problems, while local conflicts over drinking water, pastures, and roads are simmering in border areas. So far, only the local NGOs are doing their best to prevent or defuse such conflicts, yet this is not enough.
2. The economic development levels and nature of the political regimes differ from country to country.¹⁴ On the one hand, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan display relatively high rates of economic development; on the other, the local political regimes differ greatly from each other. For example, Kyrgyzstan with its (relatively!) high level of democracy, open ideology, and pluralism stands aside from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

It seems that Mackinder, who pointed out that the geopolitical descriptions could be easily translated into ideological characteristics, was right after all. Indeed, the "Outer Crescent" is liberal and democratic and the "Inner Crescent" is a transitory model which combines both ideological systems; is the Pivot area undemocratic and authoritarian?¹⁵ In his time, Halford Mackinder was obviously unable to predict who would become the actors in the Central Asian region in the 21st century to describe its future political regimes in any detail. Still, on the whole, the developments are following his forecasts.

Globalization has imparted equal importance to all corners of the globe. Mackinder wrote: "Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and

¹¹ See: A.A. Akaev, *Istoria, proshedshaia cherez moe serdtse*, Bishkek, 2003, p. 112.

¹² See: T. Ozhukeeva, *XX vek: Vozrozhdenie natsional'noy gosudarstvennosti*, Bishkek, 1993, pp. 12-40.

¹³ See: T. Ozhukeeva, *Politicheskie protsessy v stranakh Tsentral'noy Azii*, Part 1, Bishkek, 1996, p. 45.

¹⁴ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 27-90.

¹⁵ See: "Halford Mackinder. Geograficheskaia os istorii," pp. 114-117.

barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence.”¹⁶ If we ask what he had in mind, we can answer: the security of each actor, irrespective of its location and potential, depends on integration. Mackinder warned mankind about the conventional nature of state borders: even if events happen far from our own country, we should not remain indifferent—the planet is too small for this.

I believe that the above testifies that any part of the globe may become the heart of the Pivot area at any moment and that when writing the above Mackinder had in mind the threat of terror with which no superpower can cope single-handedly. This says that to become the Pivot area, a state does not need to be strong or absolutely independent. Even Kyrgyzstan could become the heart of the Pivot area if the geostrategic interests of its close and distant neighbors, especially of those that claim the role of a world leader, depend on our republic’s territorial integrity.

¹⁶ H. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1904, p. 422.