

## THE INFLUENCE OF MACKINDER'S THEORY ON CURRENT U.S. DEPLOYMENT IN EURASIA: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Mackinder's basic ideas about the Eurasian Heartland remain the most pertinent vision to understand the strategic changes which have occurred over post-Soviet space, as well as the current U.S. military deployment inside it. In fact, the 1904 "Pivot" theory<sup>1</sup> (and its successive revisions as the "Heartland" theory<sup>2</sup>) suggested a range of concepts that were destined to enter the standard lexicon of international relations during and, to an even greater extent, after the end of the Cold War.

<sup>1</sup> See: H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1904, pp. 421-437.

<sup>2</sup> See: H. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1969 (originally published 1919); idem, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1943, pp. 595-605.

The starting point of this analysis is that the end of bipolar world has created an international situation which, from the point of view of a U.S. power resolute in maintaining world hegemony, closely resembles the British situation at the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to understand this we have first to assess the similar structure of these two powers, which we can call "Atlantic" for the sake of simplification. These are chiefly maritime commercial powers, based on the imposition of a precise economic constitution characterized by the application of free trade principles to the world economy. These principles correspond to certain advantages, such as financial and technical skills, that they possess over all others actors. Nevertheless these powers are fundamentally fragile, and the description remains

more theoretical than practical. The U.S. share of world economy is today shrinking as was the British vis-à-vis Germany. To compensate for this, military force thus remains crucial to maintaining the hegemonic position of the maritime world power. Another central feature of this kind of power is its effort to impose a universal liberal economic constitution that goes parallel with a pretension to the moral superiority of its cultural and social structure.<sup>3</sup> A consequence of this combination of escalating force and sense of moral superiority is the legitimization of interventions in the political affairs or territory of other powers that resist the extension of the hegemon's strategic enterprise, even when the Atlantic power undertakes behavior violating the basic norms of humanitarian law and ethics, as did the British in South Africa at the time of Mackinder's first elaboration of his thought, or U.S. waging its "war on terror" today.

For the Atlantic power, today as a century ago, the main potential challenge to its hegemony could arise from the development of diplomatic contacts between continental powers. The evolution of these contacts into a stable alliance could result in the building of a continental network of

<sup>3</sup> On British roots of current U.S. tendency to "humanitarian imperialism," see: N. Ferguson, *Empire. The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, Basic Books, New York, 2003.

powers as an alternative to the maritime one. Such an evolution is made more likely by the creation of a single international system and actually configures a general change of the paradigm governing international life, a fact that Mackinder correctly identified in 1904 as the end of "Columbian era."<sup>4</sup> The main international development pushing the British imperialist to write the first version of his theory was in fact the building of railway transportation infrastructures by the continental Empires. Mackinder clearly understood that these infrastructures could compete with the sea-lanes and, by enabling the efficient utilization of previously inaccessible natural resources, enable the development of a continental power with the potential to break the hegemony of the maritime powers.

The paper overviews the main redeployments of Mackinder's theories up until the present time, underlining that they have been mostly used to play Eurasian actors one against the other. It argues that the deep understanding of Eurasian dynamics and importance for the world that was opened by the British geographer could be applied to advocate a very different position to that articulated by Mackinder: namely, as a stimulus for inner continental cooperation instead of containment.

<sup>4</sup> H. Mackinder, "On the Scope and Methods of Geography," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1887, pp. 141-174.

## Applied Geopolitics: Mackinder after World War I

To understand this parallel between the U.K. in 1904 and the U.S. in 2004, and the role of Mackinder's thought in the current international situation, we should still highlight the core areas that the theoretician singled out as crucial for a definition of the natural base of world power that could challenge the British one.

Closely associated since 1904 with the conception of Heartland, Central Asia, is only one of the strategic crossroads where different continental powers meet. Along with Central Asia, the British geographer insisted on two other regions which are today again at the heart of U.S. world strategy.

As described in detail in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, there is first of all Eastern Europe, the area between the Baltic and Black seas historically forming a *limes* between Europe (in civilizational terms) and Eurasia. Through this area, according to the British geographer, at the end of World War I the Heartland overlapped the European peninsula. His main element of concern then was that Moscow and Berlin could decide to form an alliance associating the two main poles of power of the Eurasian landmass. His answer to this rapprochement was to suggest to the delegates at the peace conference the creation of a buffer zone between Russia and Germany. Composed of independent neo-States, its purpose would be to dismember Eastern Europe into a large number of states, fixing an unequal situation on the ground, in order to keep it in a permanent condition of rivalry.<sup>5</sup>

Mackinder went further trying to implement his plans in first person when he was appointed British High Commissioner to South Russia at the end of 1919. The report he sent from the field delineated a geopolitical scheme for the “neutralization” of Russia that proved valid even seventy years later.<sup>6</sup> For Mackinder, “Caucasus and Caspian should be considered as elements of a broader policy.” Along with other Central European countries, he wanted the West to promote the independence of Ukraine along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Moreover, Mackinder anticipated Zbigniew Brzezinski’s strategy for post-Soviet Russia envisaging to cut the country into pieces through the British support of Gen. Denikin government.<sup>7</sup> Indeed Mackinder endowed his plan with detailed measures intended to make it work on economical terms through industrial and commercial joint Russian-British syndicates, especially insisting that it was important “to secure a position on the Caspian sea.”<sup>8</sup> In line with the moralistic component noted above, this plan for rewriting the map of Eastern Europe, coming from a power which had just further enlarged its colonial enterprise thanks to the war, was sustained by a moral discourse which refers to the Heartland’s power as the “world basis of militarism,” to be contained in “the general interest of humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

Of no less consequence for understanding today’s U.S. policy is the third crucial area highlighted by the British geographer as decisive for fixing WWI results: Palestine. Mackinder analyzed in detail how, by virtue of basic geography, Britain’s triumph in the Middle East would be challenged by continental power in the near future. Mackinder singled out a second African Heartland (the “Southern Heartland”), with the Arab lands in between as their natural element of junction opened to the projection of force from the side of the sea.<sup>10</sup> With a similar conception circulating among the British imperial élite, one could only suppose that they had a role in influencing British attitudes in support of Zionist expansion in Arab lands.

In order to close this rapid overview of the impact of Mackinder’s geopolitical conception after World War I, with its potential impact on contemporary U.S. policy, one should bear in mind another fundamental passage. As a recent Italian study analyzed in details, a number of elements of Hitler’s imperial geopolitical *Weltanschauung* for the space east of Germany were directly related to Mackinder’s ideas.<sup>11</sup> Since the first version of his theory, Mackinder insisted on a representation of Russia

<sup>5</sup> See: P.A. Dossena, *Hitler & Churchill. Mackinder e la sua scuola*, Terziaria, Milan, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See: H. Mackinder, “General Report, with Appendices, on Situation in South Russia; Recommendations for Future Policy,” *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, First Series, Vol. III, London, 1949, pp. 777-784.

<sup>7</sup> See: V.I. Maksimenko, “Rossia i Azia, ili anti-Brzezinski (Īcherk geopolitiki 2000 goda),” *Vostok*, No. 5, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> H. Mackinder, *General Report...*, p. 786.

<sup>9</sup> H. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*.

<sup>10</sup> “If the World-Island be inevitably the principal seat of humanity on this globe and if Arabia, as the passage-land from Europe to Indies and from the Northern to the Southern Heartland, be central for the World-Island, then the hill citadel of Jerusalem has a strategical position with reference to the world realities not differing essentially from the ideal position in the perspective of the Middle Ages or its strategical position between ancient Babylon and Egypt” (H. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 89).

<sup>11</sup> See: P.A. Dossena, op. cit.

as a substitute for the Mongol Empire, an entity conducive of “Slavic backwardness” and “Asiatic destruction.” In this sense the British geographer was one of those who set up the theoretical terrain for the project of German domination of the Russians,<sup>12</sup> instead of cooperation between the two European giants (advocated for instance by leading German geopolitician Karl Haushofer).<sup>13</sup> One should remember the ideological characteristics of the Nazi milieu, deeply influenced by esoteric and eschatological visions. For such people the captivating appeal of the Mackinder’s formula, prospecting the perspective of World command as something automatically following the control of a precise geographical area, could only be an additional element pushing toward the realization of their insane design.

## The Endurance of Mackinder’s Thought through the Cold War

After World War II, although geopolitics was no longer the widely debated theme that it had been in the inter-war period, it became in the United States a conceptual instrument in the study of power projection on the global scale.<sup>14</sup> Since the start of the war, in the U.S. it was widely thought that the German re-elaboration of the Heartland conception lied at the base of the initial Nazi military success.<sup>15</sup> This belief engendered a wide curiosity for the idea. A series of publications appeared where, along with a condemnation of the ideological tool of the European opponent, there was also an effort directed at the creation of an analytical instrument “more true” and “more right” to be used in the guiding U.S. engagement in world affairs. On the basis of this concern, a *geopolitics* opposed to the “evil” *Geopolitik* became “a geographically based strategic doctrine in the interest of American power.”<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that the U.S. is a fertile breeding ground for such geographically based strategic doctrines. This was indeed the first great power to elaborate a foreign policy based on geographical data, as testified by the Monroe doctrine and even the myth of the “Frontier.” Geographical knowledge in the U.S. was always associated with the state apparatus in charge of Foreign policy, as in the career of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Hooson reported that Mackinder’s ideas were widely known in the high echelons of U.S. strategic planning in the 1950s.<sup>17</sup>

Bearing in mind these evolutions, one can assume that Mackinder’s conception has consistently been a reference for the American policy making establishment. In fact, it was the concept underpinning the construction of strategic alliances in the “Rimland” (such as NATO and CENTO) which underwrote the U.S.’s Cold War-era Containment policy after World War II. By means of these alliances, the U.S. shifted its military border across the world’s oceans through different chains of security-dependent clients, justifying their mobilization with the same sense of menace vis-à-vis the continental power that was firstly clearly formulated by the British imperialist. In this perspective, it is

<sup>12</sup> This linkage is also admitted by W.H. Parker in his *Mackinder Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*, Oxford, 1982, p. 245.

<sup>13</sup> See : K.Haushofer, *De la geopolitique*, Fayard, Paris, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> See: C. Jean, *Geopolitica*, Laterza, Bari, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: M. Antonsich, “Dalla Geopolitik alla Geopolitics. Conversione ideologica di una dottrina di potenza,” *Quaderni del dottorato di ricerca in Geografia politica*, Università di Napoli, No. 4, 1994, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> See: D. Hooson, “The Heartland—Then and Now,” in: *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West*, ed. by B. Blouet, Frank Cass, London, 2005.

worth recalling the work of Nicholas Spykman.<sup>18</sup> Although he shifted the focus of world power from the pivot area to the insular and peninsular “Rimland” around it, it still has the appeal of a doctrine of global imperialism focused on the inner Eurasian core as the main basis for a power antagonistic to a maritime global enterprise.

## Mackinder’s Revival after the End of Communism

The fact that Mackinder’s theory constitutes an essential and integral part of the U.S. presence east of the Atlantic Ocean became clear after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. Perhaps nothing better than Mackinder’s vision allows U.S. to understand the deployment and the actions of the U.S. in the Greater Heartland, including the Middle East. After an initial hesitancy at the beginning of the 1990s, precipitated by the shock produced by the disappearance of the many decade-long enemy, American policy has clearly followed the indications traced by the British a century earlier in all the three crucial theaters delineated above, and a certain resemblance to the former strategy of the British Empire can be observed.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, the imperative of the maintenance of “geopolitical pluralism” in the post-Soviet space asserted by Zbigniew Brzezinski is only the most evident outcome of this tradition.<sup>20</sup> Along with this well-known strategy in the post-Soviet space, one could observe this Anglo-American continuity in the unconditional support for radical Zionist forces in Israel, forces that today share with U.S. extreme right politicians the mystical importance given to the site of Jerusalem, which Mackinder systematized in his writings.

And again, Mackinder’s guidance is clearly present in the strategy aimed at detaching “New” Eastern Europe not only from Russia, as pledged by the British, but also from the EU civilizational core, a strategy aimed at preventing the emergence of an autonomous geopolitical actor in the decisive “platform of democracy” that Western European edge of Eurasian landmass was for Mackinder.<sup>21</sup>

In all these three theaters, the main element of U.S. strategy is the support of regimes entirely depending on their external sponsor for the implementation of its foreign policy course. The main concern of the overall concept seems to be to maintain these regimes in order to have them as geopolitical stumbling blocks among the main strategic actors that could challenge U.S. pretensions to world hegemony. In this way they act as a sort of a guarantee that the continental powers will not build strong links between themselves that would allow them to become assertive and strong enough to constitute an alternative international order, in particular, as it was in 1904, through the building of continental trading railways that could interfere in the world trade monopoly by sea routes assured by the U.S. and its allies.

<sup>18</sup> Cf.: O. Sevaistre, “Un géant de la géopolitique: Nicholas John Spykman,” *Stratégie*, No. 3, 1988, pp. 115-132.

<sup>19</sup> In this sense: K.E. Mayer, *The Dust of Empire*, 2003 (tr. it., *La polvere dell’Impero. Il “grande gioco” in Asia centrale*, Corbaccio, 2004); N. Ferguson, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> See: I. Torbakov, *Reexamining Old Concepts about the Caucasus and Central Asia*: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/cav020404a.shtml>], 4 February, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Definition used in “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace” (tr. it., “Il mondo intero e come vincere la pace,” *Limes*, No. 1, 1994, pp. 171-182).

## U.S. Deployment in Former Soviet Heartland

Given the location of the Mackinder conference, it is worth analyzing in detail Mackinder's influence on U.S. policy in Central Asia. This has been the product of contradictory impulses. In the aftermath of the fall of the U.S.S.R., there were few American experts who would dare to argue that the U.S. had any relevant interest in a region that, firstly, was marginal to the areas of traditional U.S. engagement, and secondly, was not even perceived as an identifiable object in its own right—indeed, it was *terra incognita* for most of the Americans.

Accordingly, in the early 1990s, the U.S. approach toward the region was negative. That is to say, given the power vacuum opened by the Soviet collapse, the U.S. was primarily engaged in watching and trying to ensure that no other major power, especially Iran, made too much of an advance in the region.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, since 1995, without declaring it openly, the U.S. began to try to implement a real strategic revolution all along the former Soviet Southern belt distributed around the three inner seas—Black, Caspian and Aral. Although this is presented as a fact related to the growing interest for Caspian oil, it is clear that the motivation is first of all strategic rather than economic.<sup>23</sup> This action was accompanied by the rise of a strategic concept which looks at the importance of Central Asia from the point of view of a **perception of its centrality** among East and West, South and North, that is to say, as a pivotal area in world politics.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult not to detect at the basis of this perception the strategic thinking stemming from Mackinder's theory of the Heartland.

In its concrete implementation, the new U.S. application of the thought of the British strategist resulted in a further push toward the North of the former line of containment. This endeavor is implicit in the U.S. support for the GUUAM regional grouping (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova).<sup>25</sup> The framing of this bloc went parallel with the implementation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) NATO program, and the stubborn U.S. insistence on the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. The main concern of the Eurasian corridor thus established, is aimed at taking control of the pivot area by building a buffer zone from Eastern Europe to the western border of China. It implies a further projection to the East of the NATO area of operation, as has been evident since the approval of the Alliance's new strategic concept in 1999. Also noteworthy is the particular attention to the Black Sea basin, a basin that, as Mackinder noted, if the access is controlled by the continental power, will be absorbed in its entirety into the Heartland. Against this perspective, as was the case in 1904, the Anglo-American sponsored buffer of geopolitical alliances intends to separate Russia and Iran from the pivot area itself, because this connection could interfere in the system of alliances assuring world trade monopoly by sea routes managed by the U.S. This is leading to the building of a sort of "Rimland" extension to the North, a fact that is clearly visible on a Eurasian map that singles out the countries that adhered to the GUUAM scheme.

Moscow also understood developments in this scheme way. This is demonstrated through its anti-western policy of the re-activation of all the "east" and "southern" axis of its traditional diplomacy, in order to cut across the East-West orientation of the U.S. sponsored Eurasian corridor supporting, among other actions, North-South continental trading railways.

<sup>22</sup> See: G.E. Fuller, *Central Asia. The New Geopolitics*, RAND, Santa Monica, 1992, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> See: S. Blank, "Every Shark East of Suez: Great Power Interests, Policies and Tactics in the Transcaspian Energy Wars," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 1999, pp. 373-383.

<sup>24</sup> See: R. Legvold, *Thinking Strategically: The Major Powers, Kazakhstan and Central Asian Nexus*, MA, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> See: A. Lieven, "G.U.U.A.M: What Is It, and What Is It For?" *Eurasia Insight*, 18 December, 2000: available at [www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight].

By 2001, the terms of this game were evident to all its participants. In one of the few assessments of the U.S. policy toward the region before 11 September it was stated that “this region should matter to the United States because it matters considerably to every other major Eurasian power whose global and regional interests affect U.S. interests,” and that “U.S. interests in Central Eurasia almost definitely will grow.”<sup>26</sup> By this time, the window of opportunity opened by the Soviet suicide in 1991 was irrevocably on the point of closing to American influence. Only an event of the scale of 11 September was able to reopen the game for the Atlantic power to the point that it could create a new military ring to be added at the old Cold War border, from Southern Europe to the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. is even re-deploying its old “Rimland” policy deep into the Heartland—according to the words of Donald Rumsfeld, “in the heart and soul of Eurasia.”<sup>28</sup>

The influence of Mackinder, in particular the feeling of omnipotence that his simple formulas could impart to political circles that are inclined to think according to mystical conceptions, was shown in the case of Nazi Germany, and is partially being demonstrated again by the U.S. engagement with Central Asia. The consequences of this could be very serious, not only for the states which emerged from the Soviet bloc and which have become today pawns in U.S. designs, but also for the whole world.

## C o n c l u s i o n

The current situation of international relations owes a lot to the legacy of Mackinder’s thought. The theories of the British geographer are living policies and their influence is felt on all the main hot spots of current instability, from the Holy Land to the Western frontier of China.

This offspring of geopolitical imperialism’s maneuvers, which are going on before our eyes, is especially dangerous today, as it happens in the context of a structural crisis of the U.S. capacity to act as a regulator of international life.<sup>29</sup> This is particularly evident in the case of Central Asia. Here, pursuing an effort clearly motivated by the rationale of opposing its potential challenger, the U.S. is augmenting existing regional tensions and causing additional conflicts. Far from guaranteeing security for the region, it is initiating a race for military bases. It is also protecting the political stability of Central Asian regimes (or, in certain cases, supporting opposition against the center), which tends to alienate the local populations, thus ultimately strengthening local terrorist networks.<sup>30</sup>

It is time to understand Mackinder by turning his conclusions upside-down. The positive legacy of Mackinder’s theory is the way that it successfully alerts the attention of the European elite toward lands that had been largely forgotten. However, this positive heuristic moment was up to now overruled by a sense of menace that the geographer tried to communicate. Today it is of a paramount importance to apprehend Mackinder’s heritage in the objective conditions of the new century. Given

<sup>26</sup> C. Fairbanks, C.R. Nelson, S.F. Starr, K. Weisbrode, *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, Central Asian-Caucasus Institute, Atlantic Council, Washington D.C., January 2001, pp. 7, 95: available at [www.acus.org/Publications/Default.htm].

<sup>27</sup> See: M. Amineh, M. Parvizi, H. Houweling, *Central Eurasia in Global Politics: Conflict, Security and Development*, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden & Boston, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Rumsfeld’s Speech, Germany, 11 July, 2003: available at [http://http://defense-link.mil/releases/2003/nr20030612-0095.html].

<sup>29</sup> As analyzed by E. Todd in *After the Empire. The Breakdown of the American Order*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, and I. Wallerstein in “The Eagle has Crash Landed,” *Foreign Policy*, July-August 2002.

<sup>30</sup> See: F. Vielmini, “Implications of U.S. Military Presence in Central Asia Security System: Evolution, Current Situation, and Future Perspectives,” in: *Dynamics of Transformation in Central Asia—Perspectives from the Field*, International Conference, Rome, 5-6 November, 2004 (forthcoming publication).

an imploded Russia, a democratic Germany and a fast-developing China, the unity of the Heartland is no more a threat for international peace. On the contrary, the threat emanates from attempts by one external power to divide the Eurasian continent. As Mackinder's Pivot/Heartland theory underwent many conversions during the first century of its life, it is time to redevelop it once more to highlight the positive element of the potential of land power and the role of railroads for developing Inner Asian lands. It could be then used to build that Eurasian cooperation that was already advocated by the German *Geopolitik* school before the coming of the Nazism, and that is today offered by the Paris-Berlin-Moscow alliance that arose in response to aggression against Iraq. Such a development, a new Heartland, is urgently needed in order to stop the logic of war without end on which the United States is operating.

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