

WHITHER “HEARTLAND”? CENTRAL ASIA, GEOGRAPHY AND GLOBALIZATION

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I. Introduction

This article attempts a double task. First, it looks at the main premises of Halford J. Mackinder’s analysis in his renowned 1904 address to the Royal Geographical Society, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, and discusses some of the problems. It observes that these problems have actually rendered the whole Heartland thesis a fallacy from its very inception, and argues that this resilient fallacy continues to distort perceptions and policies in/on Central Asia. Second, it draws attention to the severe geographical predicament of Central Asia in an era of rapid globalization, and points out how a host of myths led by the ghost of Mackinder’s Heartland, in conjunction with the biases and flaws of neoliberal dogma, serve to impede the development of strategies for dealing with that predicament.

The landlocked interior of the Eurasian continent was called the “Heart-land” and “the Pivot area” in Mackinder’s 1904 address, not because he attributed some metaphysical intrinsic strategic quality to the region, but because he believed that the region possessed vast natural resources, including a huge agricultural potential. He was convinced that thanks to the revolution in land transportation recently brought about by railroad technology, Inner/Central Asia was destined to provide its contemporary political master with an unequalled economic capability, becoming the engine of an inevitable Russian bid for world dominance.

Mackinder’s confidence in the commercial competitiveness of railroads with maritime transport and in the vastness of resources in Inner/Central Asia both have turned out to be misplaced. The region couldn’t have and has not lived up to the “pivot” billing given to it by Mackinder. The Heartland

thesis has survived not on account of the validity of the underlying premises and the merits of the argument, but because its conclusions recommending the containment of Russia fit snugly into the Cold War ideational scheme that dominated much of the 20th century.

The ghost of the Heartland fallacy is still very much around and it is not a benign one.

II. Mackinder's Heartland

The relative immunity of Russia to projections of military power from its rivals, especially—but not exclusively—from maritime states like Britain, was well understood at least since the ill-fated campaign of Napoleon earlier in the 19th century. Many well-known thinkers and commentators from Marx to Mahan had promptly noted this relative immunity.

The factors that created a logistical nightmare for would-be invaders, however, cut both ways. The vastness of the territory and the limitations of available transportation technologies imposed significant restraints on the Russian state as well, in both military and economic terms. In implicit recognition of these restraints, little attention seems to have been paid in the West to the economic potentialities of the Russian interior until well into the 19th century.

Several developments in the course of the 19th century, however, altered the view on Russia. Among the most pertinent for our discussion were:

- The successful expansion of the Russian Empire in Asia southwards from its previous northern domain, coming on the heels of its southwards expansion in Europe in the 18th century, testified to the significant growth of Russian power and sharply increased the perception of a Russian threat in Britain—especially regarding British South Asia.
- The rise of railroad technology revolutionized land transportation and reconfigured old military and economic equations.
- The phenomenal economic transformation of the province of “New Russia” (consisting in part of the territories freshly acquired from the Ottomans and corresponding roughly to the hinterland of northern Black Sea coast, including most of modern day Ukraine) obliged Western observers to reconsider their hitherto dismissive attitude toward the commercial development potentialities of the vast and dormant territorial possessions of the Russian Empire.

In a relatively short period of time, both the prospects of economic development in Inner Eurasia and a Russian expansionist threat to the coastal regions of the continent, acquired plausibility.

Mackinder was only one of the scores of people who studied and commented on these issues at the time.¹ Many others had long noted that Russia was for the most part beyond the reach of the maritime countries both militarily and economically; many attributed great economic potential to the relatively little known vast Asian territories of the Russian Empire; many thought that railroads were providing land powers with an invaluable new means to increase their economic and military might; and many—certainly in Britain—saw Russia as a major threat. But it was Mackinder who

¹ As even W.H. Parker, who otherwise tends to treat Mackinder as a genius, concedes, “many of his ideas had been anticipated by others, and doubtless many of them originated from a familiarity with earlier work” (W.H. Parker, *Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 250). I have discussed some of these antecedents both in Britain and the United States in Hekimoglu (see: L. Hekimoglu, “The Absent Pivot: Reflections on Mackinder's Heartland Fallacy on its Centennial,” in: *Governance and Global (Dis)Orders: Trends, Transformations, and Impasses*, ed. by Alison Howell, The York Centre for International and Security Studies, Toronto, 2004).

put together a coherent argument based on and incorporating all of the above premises and assertions. In other words, none of the individual components of Mackinder's 1904 Heartland/Pivot of History argument were altogether original, but his thesis as a whole managed to achieve a degree of novelty.

Reminiscing about the 1870s, Mackinder wrote: "Britain's supremacy on the ocean had not yet been challenged, and the only danger she saw at that time to her overseas empire was in the Asiatic position of Russia. During this period the London newspapers were quick to detect evidence of Russian intrigue in every rumor from Constantinople and in every tribal disturbance along the northwest frontier of India. British sea power and Russian land power held the center of the international stage."² At the turn of the century, the British perception of a Russian threat continued to be acute, and this perception constituted a dominant theme/element in Mackinder's thinking at the time. Even before the 1904 address Mackinder's work shows signs of anxiety about the seriousness of external threats to British supremacy. In a book published two years earlier, for instance, Russia is obviously very much on the forefront of his thought when he expresses concern with how to maintain British imperial security "in the presence of vast Powers, broad based on the resources of half continents."³

In his 1904 address Mackinder primarily focuses on three factors regarding the Eurasian interior: the economic potential of the region, the promise of railroads, and the incapability of sea powers like the U.K. and the U.S. to penetrate into it. His concern is that now that Russia has used its advantages as a major land power and entrenched itself securely inside the heart of the Eurasian landmass beyond the effective military—and commercial/economic—reach of sea powers, it is only a matter of time before it starts to take advantage of the recently developed railroad technology to successfully exploit the presumably immense economic potential of this vast region and become the global hegemon.

The conviction "that commercially the railway gave land powers an advantage over maritime states using shipping," had already been expressed by Mackinder in a 1900 article.⁴ Now he repeated the same claim even more forcefully regarding the economic prospects of Inner/Central Asia: "A generation ago steam and the Suez Canal appeared to have increased the mobility of sea-power relatively to land-power. Railways acted chiefly as feeders to ocean-going commerce. But trans-continental railways are now transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such effect as in the closed heart-land of Euro-Asia, ... the century will not be old before all Asia is covered with railways. The spaces within the Russian Empire and Mongolia are so vast, and their potentialities in population, wheat, cotton, fuel, and metals so incalculably great, that it is inevitable that a vast economic world, more or less apart, will there develop inaccessible to oceanic commerce."⁵

Mackinder's is an alarm call: Russia, he is saying, already politically in control of this vast region, will soon put in place a network of railways to exploit the "incalculably great" riches of the region and will turn into an economic and military behemoth set on its way to world hegemony. "The over-setting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight."⁶

Mackinder's 1904 analysis puts a great premium on the inaccessibility of the region for sea powers, but ultimately the crux of the argument rests on his assessment of the "incalculably great potentialities

² H.J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1943, p. 595.

³ H.J. Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas*, Heinemann, London, 1902, p. 358.

⁴ See: W.H. Parker, op. cit., p. 231.

⁵ H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1904, p. 434.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 436.

ties” of Inner/Central Eurasia. Put in a different way, inaccessibility for the sea powers matters because of the presumed great riches of the region. The “Heartland” is granted that designation not on account of its distant past but its potential future.

Why, however, was Mackinder so convinced of an enormous economic potential in the Eurasian interior? So convinced as to stake the whole Heartland/Pivot of History thesis on the validity of that assumption?

The answer, I believe, lies in understanding that Mackinder was writing with hindsight of the developments of the 19th century in European Russia, which witnessed the extraordinary opening up of the Black Sea steppe to commercial agriculture and world trade.⁷ Victorious against the Ottomans in a series of military engagements, Russia annexed the Black Sea steppe and the northern Black Sea littoral by the last quarter of the 18th century. The province of “New Russia,” which was blessed with the extremely fertile *chernozem* (black soil) almost in its entirety but hitherto remained a sparsely populated frontier land where Cossacks and Tatars maintained their semi-settled existence routinely raiding the other side, was now rapidly opened to settlement.

The population increased no less than fifteen-fold in just over half a century.⁸ The region had already possessed a favorable river transportation system which was now further developed; but the real change in transportation came with the building of a railway network from the late 1860s onwards.⁹ With convenient access to Black Sea ports, and of course with the opening of the Turkish Straits to international commerce by the early 19th century, “New Russia” was very well placed to emerge as a granary of industrializing Europe.

Britain had lost its self-sufficiency in foodstuffs, specifically grains, by the early 19th century, and although the Corn Laws were not abolished until mid-century, it was fast becoming a grain importer along with several other countries on the continent. From mid-19th century onwards, “New Russia” became a major exporter of grains. During the half a century between the Crimean War and Mackinder’s article, Russia’s total wheat exports increased six-fold.¹⁰ During the same period, on average about a quarter of British and more than a third of French wheat imports came from Russia, that is, from the Black Sea steppe.¹¹ During the early years of the 20th century, the total amount of grains Russia was able to export thanks to the incredible transformation of the Black Sea steppe, was more than double the total for the U.S. and Canada combined.¹²

The rapid development of commercial agriculture in the region was accompanied by the rise of new towns and transportation infrastructure, as well as advancement in shipping, manufacturing, and mining. The rise of “New Russia” as the agricultural and commercial powerhouse of the Russian Empire was nothing short of phenomenal. The significance of this development for the Russian state cannot be overstated, and it should come as no surprise that to a well-informed commentator of the turn of the century on Russia like Mackinder, the transformation of the Black Sea steppe was a perspective-defining event.

⁷ Probably the best study in the English language on the 19th century transformation of “New Russia” is Mose Lofley Harvey’s 1938 PhD dissertation, which unfortunately remains unpublished. Vassilis Kardasis’s 2001 book is also useful despite its more specific focus on the Greek communities of Southern Russia.

⁸ See: V. Kardasis, *Diaspora Merchants in the Black Sea: The Greeks in Southern Russia 1775-1861*, Lexington Books, New York, 2001, p. 29.

⁹ See: M.L. Harvey, *The Development of Russian Commerce on the Black Sea and its Significance*, PhD dissertation, University of California, 1938, Ch. 3.

¹⁰ See: *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹¹ See: *Ibid.*, Ch. 4.

¹² See: *Ibid.*, pp. 238-242. A 1906 U.S. Department of Agriculture report written by I.M. Rubinow, drew attention to the fact that despite the use of rather backward agricultural methods by its farmers and despite the comparatively small size of its wheat growing area largely confined to the black-soil region, Russia still produced more wheat than the United States. The report emphasized that despite its vastness Siberia currently accounted for barely 6 percent of the wheat acreage of all Russia (see the summary of the report in “Russia’s Wheat Surplus,” *National Geographic Magazine*, October 1906, pp. 580-583).

In a crucial—yet rarely noted—paragraph of the 1904 address Mackinder underlines this clearly: “Perhaps **the change of greatest intrinsic importance which took place in Europe in the last century** was the southward migration of the Russian peasants, so that, whereas agricultural settlements formerly ended at the forest boundary, the centre of the population of all European Russia now lies to south of that boundary, in the midst of the wheat-fields which have replaced the more western steppes”¹³ (my emphasis).

It was the economic development of the Black Sea steppe that in no small part provided the Russian state with the capability to expand into Western Turkestan in the latter half of the 19th century. If the development of the steppe in Europe gave the Russian state the economic/financial edge to further expand into Asia and consolidate its power there, what would happen if Russia’s vast Asian provinces were to be developed in a likewise manner, providing the Russian state with a much larger resource base that can be utilized toward even more ambitious political/military ends?

The unmistakable underlying assumption in Mackinder’s 1904 article is that a repeat performance is inevitable in Inner/Central Asia. Once the Russian state began the full-scale utilization of the “incalculably great” resources of Inner Asia, it would be only a matter of time before it started expanding, first into the crescent of Eurasian rim, and then overseas by becoming a sea power as well. The resources of Inner/Central Asia, he is afraid, will set Russia on its way to becoming the global hegemon.

This preoccupation is clear in Mackinder’s 1904 presentation, and was well understood and shared by his audience as indicated by the discussion after the address at the Royal Geographical Society. A Mr. Amery,¹⁴ pointing out that “many countries which were steppe became agricultural and industrial,” reiterated: “The Russian Empire, which covers the great steppe region, but is no longer in the hands of the old steppe people, is really a portion of the agricultural world, economically, which has conquered the steppe and is turning it into a great agricultural industrial power... Mr. Mackinder referred to the fact that it is only within the last century that the agricultural races have occupied and populated the southern steppe of Russia proper. They are doing the same thing in Central Asia.”¹⁵

A Mr. Hogarth wanted Mackinder to confirm that he understood the argument correctly: do you mean, he asked, “that the state of things which is coming to pass in this inner pivot land will be entirely different to anything that has been seen there before? That is to say, something like a stationary state of things has been brought about, and the country is being developed, till it will even be able to export its own products to the rest of the world.”¹⁶

“I do mean exactly what Mr. Hogarth says,” responded Mackinder, “I mean that for the first time within recorded history ... you have a great stationary population being developed in the steppe lands. This is a revolution in the world that we have to face and reckon with.”¹⁷ A Russia replicating in the steppes of Central Asia the experience of “New Russia” at a many-fold magnitude, and in the process growing economically and demographically in giant steps, would eventually present a global military challenge to all other powers. Mackinder had no doubts as to the gravity of the situation as he saw it: “As regards the potentialities of the land and of the people, I would point out that in Europe there are now more than 40,000,000 people in the steppe land of Russia, and it is by no means yet densely

¹³ H.J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” pp. 433-434.

¹⁴ Although not specified in the published text, it is certain that he was Leopold Charles Maurice Stennett Amery (1873-1955), journalist and Conservative politician. Born in India, he later served as Colonial Under-secretary (1919-1922), First Lord of the Admiralty (1922-1923), Colonial Secretary (1924-1929), and Secretary of State for India (1940-1945).

¹⁵ H.J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” p. 441.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 441-442.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

occupied, and that the Russian population is probably increasing faster than any other great civilized or half-civilized population in the world. ...you have to face the fact that in a hundred years 40,000,000 people have occupied but a mere corner of the steppe. I think you are on the way to a population which will be numbered by the hundred million; and this is a tendency which you must take into account in assigning values to the variable quantities in the equation of power for which I was seeking a geographical formula.”¹⁸

And because of the inaccessibility of this heart of Asia for sea powers like Britain, there was little to do for them but to watch as Russia was “steadily hastening the accomplishment of what I may call the non-oceanic economic system.”¹⁹ The way Mackinder saw it, after consolidating this non-oceanic economic system built on the resources of the Eurasian steppe, Russia was bound to make a move on the “marginal regions” of the continent (what he alternately calls “the Inner Crescent;” this is also what Spykman later called the “*Rimland*”), and thus increasing its industrial strength further, would develop the fleet necessary to found the world empire. The only thing to do for sea powers like Britain to prevent such an eventuality, Mackinder said, was “to act upon the marginal region, maintaining the balance of power there as against the expansive internal forces. I believe that the future of the world depends on the maintenance of this balance of power. It appears to me that our formula makes it clear that we must see to it that we are not driven out of the marginal region. We must maintain our position there, and then, whatever happens, we are fairly secure.”²⁰ This, of course, was the recipe for what later came to be known as the policy of containment.

To the very end of his years Mackinder maintained his conviction of the vast economic potential of the Heartland. In his 1943 article revisiting the Heartland notion, he still unequivocally insisted that “upon and beneath the Heartland there is a store of rich soil for cultivation and of ores and fuels for extraction, the equal—or thereabouts—of all that lies upon and beneath the United States and the Canadian Dominion.”²¹

III. The Absent Pivot

For Mackinder (in the 1904 address, anyway), Inner/Central Asia did not possess some innate, almost metaphysical strategic value. He argued that the region was important because of the very concrete and substantial economic contributions he thought the Russian Empire would be able to get out of it. In other words, mere formal possession of Inner/Central Asia was not of any significance, unless the presumably vast economic potential of the region could be put into the service of the Empire. The whole argument, therefore, stood on the validity of two premises: one, that Inner/Central Asia possessed vast resources, especially regarding commercial agriculture and extractive industries; and two, that railroads were competitive with maritime transport even over long distances.

Both premises were erroneous, and consequently the argument invalid. But as it happened, in the long run that mattered little. Sir Halford Mackinder and his 1904 thesis, pretty much ignored in the English-speaking world for four decades, was suddenly rediscovered in the 1940s and acquired great fame by mid-century; not on account of the validity of the underlying premises and the merits of the argument, but because its conclusions recommending the containment of Russia fit snugly into the emergent Cold War discourse.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ H.J. Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace,” p. 604.

The Cold War affirmation of Mackinder's 1904 policy recommendations rendered the invalidity of the underlying premises and argument practically inconsequential. Once the Mackinderian "Heartland" proposition came to be recognized as a primary geopolitical "reality" by the practitioners of geopolitical analysis, it acquired an axiomatic quality for the subsequent generations. This is not surprising given the perception of the main tenets of their discipline by geopoliticians. As Ó Tuathail points out, "a consistent historical feature of geopolitical writing, from its origins in the late nineteenth century to its modern use by Colin Gray and others, is the claim that geopolitics is a foil to idealism, ideology and human will. ...Geopoliticians have traded on the supposed objective materialism of geopolitical analysis;" geopolitical analysis claims to address "the base of international politics, the permanent geopolitical realities around which the play of events in international politics unfolds. These geopolitical realities are held to be durable, physical determinants of foreign policy."²² And as long as the central strategic importance of Inner/Central Asia was unquestioningly taken to be a "fact," other implied attributes of the region in the heartland thinking—such as vast economic resources—quietly piggybacked on it. In other words, the axiomatic maintenance of the Heartland thesis on account of its conclusions/policy recommendations has ensured the survival of the original premises and argument as well, irrespective of the latter's demonstrable invalidity.

Almost immediately after Mackinder was rediscovered in the United States in the 1940s, his main premises and central argument came under severe criticism by many, including prominent names such as Spykman. Whatever the merits and flaws of his own theory, Spykman effectively challenged the very foundations of Mackinder's Pivot/Heartland argument. Most importantly, he rejected Mackinder's vision of Inner/Central Asia as a treasure-house of resources and wealth capable of nurturing and sustaining a world power/conqueror.²³ In his two books published in the mid-1940s, G.B. Cressey challenged Mackinder's basic assumptions regarding Inner/Central Asia even more strongly than Spykman. In terms of the nine geographical elements of power he identified (including accessibility, location, minerals, and climate) Cressey found the Heartland falling far short of the billing given to it by Mackinder. His conclusion instead was that "as a consequence of its very considerable physical disadvantages, a really significant world power was unlikely to be centred in the Heartland."²⁴

All such criticisms directed against the premises and the central argument of the Heartland thesis largely failed to make much of a dent on the Mackinderian "Inner/Central Asia as the Heartland" notion, however, especially as it soon became an integral part of Cold War discourse. Many political geographers complained,²⁵ but it was the Cold War geopoliticians who prevailed. Colin Gray was arguing as late as 1988 that Mackinder's ideas "provide an intellectual architecture, far superior to rival conceptions, for understanding the principal international security issues."²⁶

²² G. Ó Tuathail, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," *Political Geography*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992, pp. 191-192.

²³ See Spykman's posthumous short book of 1944 (*The Geography of Peace*, Harcourt Brace, New York). Later commentators have frequently presented the arguments of Mackinder and Spykman as complementary. That, however, is an optical illusion, brought about from inattentively looking at them through the lens of the containment policy. Beyond a similarity in their policy recommendations, the two arguments were almost diametrically opposite. For Spykman, Inner/Central Asia by itself had little to offer and was rather inconsequential except for allowing the Soviet Union means of access for its expansionist designs on the "Rimland" which was the real prize, well endowed in population, resources and wealth, and with access to maritime transport which he thought had uncontested superiority.

²⁴ Quoted from: G. Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, p. 128.

²⁵ For instance, R. Muir, who is often cited/quoted for his comment: "On several occasions the Heartland thesis has been systematically dismantled only to rise Phoenix-like for further punishment" (*Modern Political Geography*, Macmillan, London, 1975); or M. Blacksell who remarked on Mackinder's arguments: "despite being repeatedly challenged ... they are still allowed to form a basis for argument. The ghost seems never to be completely laid" (*Post-War Europe: A Political Geography*, Dawson, London, 1977). For both quotes, see: W.H. Parker, op. cit., p. 213).

²⁶ C.S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1988, p. 4.

To be clear, Inner/Central Asia indeed does have some economic resources, especially in its north-west, and railroads surely have made a significant impact on the region. Nonetheless, neither has come anywhere close to living up to the expectations/predictions set by Mackinder back in 1904. After a whole century—and intense Soviet efforts during much of it—the record of Inner/Central Asia as a whole remains a far cry from the image of Heartland put forward by Mackinder in 1904.

A second and vast “New Russia” in the heart of the continent has never materialized. Russian Asia had neither the soil quality, nor the climatic conditions, nor the locational advantage of proximity to ports and international markets of the Black Sea steppe’s “New Russia.” It could not, and as it turned out did not, offer Russia the chance of replicating on a larger scale the phenomenal development of southern Russia in Europe.²⁷ Mackinder was off the mark by a large margin in assessing the amplitude as well as the commercial operability of the resource base of Inner/Central Asia.

While the extremely fertile *chernozem* soil of the Black Sea steppe extends wedge-like into northern Kazakhstan, for instance, such fertile soils constitute a minuscule proportion of the soils in Inner/Central Asia.²⁸ Nor are the climatic conditions in Inner/Central Asia, aside from a few exceptions, nearly as accommodating of agriculture as the Black Sea steppe. Attempts to introduce large-scale agricultural commodity production were largely unsuccessful with only limited exceptions. In some cases, such as cotton production in Soviet Central Asia, the result was an unmitigated environmental disaster. In Inner/Central Asia, even when excluding the forest zone of Siberia, less than 7 percent of the land is arable; furthermore, given the ecological fragility of the region, little of that arable land can accommodate any large-scale commercial agriculture.

The north-west of this vast region does possess oil reserves, and western Siberian oil continues to be important in the economy of the Russian Federation; but there is little oil in the rest of Inner/Central Asia, especially if we focus on the Central Asia proper of contemporary usage.²⁹ Much of the ongoing attribution of “oil riches” to Central Asia in the media and academia alike, is little more than a myth. The most recent figures show that Kazakhstan has 9 billion barrels and Turkmenistan 0.5 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (put together, about 1 percent of proven global reserves).³⁰ All the rest of Central Asia has about as much oil as Denmark. To call Central Asia “oil rich,” therefore, is analogous to calling Sub-Saharan Africa “oil rich;” after all, Nigeria alone has more than twice as much oil as all of Central Asia.

Central Asia’s natural gas reserves in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, totaling 3.7 percent of world proven reserves, is not a negligible asset.³¹ There are, however, two important considerations that reflect on the commercial prospects of this resource as an export commodity. First, natural gas, unlike oil, is still a primarily regional commodity as it needs pipelines to take it all the way to its consumer market. Technologies that can potentially render natural gas a compet-

²⁷ Ironically, long after Mackinder many in the West continued to hold their breath in anticipation of an agricultural boom in Central Asia. Both misinformation and disinformation helped to keep the expectation alive. Typical are the remarks of a rare Western visitor to the region in the late 1950s: “...the opening of Central Asia to agriculture is one of the most daring feats of Soviet development and, if successful, could have incalculable effects on Soviet and world markets” (L.W. Henderson, *A Journey to Samarkand*, Longmans, Green and Company, Toronto, 1960, p. 109).

²⁸ See: W.W. Newey, “Biogeography—the Vegetation, Soils and Animal Life,” in: *The Soviet Union: A Systemic Geography*, ed. by Leslie Symons, Routledge, New York, 1990.

²⁹ That is, “Inner/Central Asia” minus the current territory of the Russian Federation; roughly corresponding to the territories of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China. Below I will use “Central Asia” as a term to refer to these seven countries plus Xinjiang.

³⁰ See: *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2003*.

³¹ See: *Ibidem*.

itively mobile and hence global commodity (LNG processing and gas-to-liquids synthetic oil manufacturing) are still too expensive. For the time being, therefore, the costs of building and operating long-distance pipelines to the far away natural gas consumption clusters in Europe and East Asia reduce the comparative commercial attractiveness of developing the Central Asian reserves. Second, Central Asian gas reserves are dwarfed by those of neighboring Russia and Iran which between them hold almost half of the global natural gas reserves. These two factors in combination (i.e., vast neighborhood reserves of a regional commodity) continue to have a dampening effect on the development of Central Asian natural gas.

There are varying quantities of other mineral deposits in Central Asia, some of which are of potentially high commercial value. Kazakhstan, especially, is known to possess large deposits of both iron ore and various nonferrous metals.³² Unavoidably, however, the question of distance and transportation costs emerge as a major factor in the development and prospects of these resources. Especially for the lower value ores and products (such as iron ore and iron and steel products) the difficulties remain considerable. Regarding iron ore, for instance, Sagers notes how Russian imports of Kazakh ore went down after the end of the Soviet command economy, not only because of a production decline in the Russian steel industry but also because of the cost of using Kazakh ore. Even when the ore is locally processed and higher value steel and iron products are exported instead, distance still very adversely affects the price, hence the competitiveness, of these products.³³

Ironically for a geographer, Mackinder greatly underestimated the significance of distance. Transportation costs over vast distances have imposed a considerable burden on the economic feasibility of most Central Asian commodities and goods—and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Space limits of this paper do not allow a detailed elaboration of the natural resources profile and economic performance of Inner/Central Asia, but especially the picture that emerges as the dust settles from the collapse of the Soviet Union unmistakably exposes the fallaciousness of the main premises and argument of Mackinder's 1904 address. Perhaps nothing emphasizes this better than the fact that a full century later the average GNP per capita in Central Asia stood at some 600 U.S. dollars, only marginally better than that of Sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴

The "Heartland," has never been. The "Pivot," was never there.

IV. The Fallacy Lives On

In the mid-1980s Geoffrey Parker observed that the fame of the Heartland theory was less due to the strength of the underlying argument than the apparent fit between its conclusions and the ideological layout of the Cold War: "The subjection of the Heartland to the most rigorous examination certainly revealed its shortcomings in fulfilling the world role allotted to it by its protagonists from Mackinder on. ...Perhaps the truth is that it is not so much its real attributes which account for its persistence as its role in the international scene as perceived from the West since World War II. From the late 1940s this had come to be dominated by the global confronta-

³² See: M.J. Sagers, "The Nonferrous Metals Industry of Kazakhstan," *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, Vol. 39, No. 9, 1998; idem, "The Iron Ore Industry of Kazakhstan: A Research Report," *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 1999.

³³ See: M.J. Sagers, "The Iron Ore Industry of Kazakhstan: A Research Report," pp. 220-221.

³⁴ Calculated from World Bank, *2003 World Development Indicators*, and *2001 International Yearbook and Statesmen's Who Is Who*.

tion of the two antagonistic superpowers, and the Heartland theory took on a new lease on life in this context. At a time when it was again coming under strong, and frequently disapproving, scrutiny by political geographers, it was seized upon as a method of giving a new explanatory dimension to the world scene. The Soviet Union had increasingly come to be viewed in the West as being a dangerously aggressive state, and it appeared to draw its great power from the remote fastness of Central Asia.”³⁵

Fifteen years later and with the hindsight of Soviet collapse, Geoffrey Parker followed up on that thread of thought: “As the Cold War drew toward its conclusion, the continentalist scenario of the political geographers of the immediate post-war period, which reached its most dramatic expression in the Heartland thesis, was vigorously called into question. The immense potential ascribed to the Heartland had not materialized and the specter of Soviet power was increasingly perceived to be illusory. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 appeared to be conclusive proof of this and consequently demonstrated that the associated continentalist idea had also been a false one. The Cold War image of the maritime world as a weak and scattered periphery around a powerful Soviet world centre, its strength founded on the enormous potential of the Heartland, gave place to that of a West as the centre of the capitalist world-economy and with the United States as its contemporary hegemonic power.”³⁶

Or rather this is what should have happened. But Parker, like so many before, underestimates the resilience of the Heartland notion. I agree with him that the ghost of the Heartland thesis should be put to rest for good at long last, but I disagree with his suggestion that this has already occurred.

Even a cursory survey of the discussion on post-Soviet Central Asia amply demonstrates that. Academics and journalists, politicians and technocrats, from within and outside the region, cheerfully join in a discourse where Central Asia is depicted as a strategically crucial region with immense natural resources, where the problems are “transitional” and the future is bright. The Mackinderian Heartland fallacy unmistakably serves as a key element in the construction and maintenance of this discourse.

Let me quote from a 1994 address by Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat, the President of Mongolia between 1990-1997, for a typical example. Central Asia, he says, is “a region destined to play an important role in global political and socioeconomic life... We the Central Asian nations living in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, are all linked by many common traits determined by geography, our historical and cultural backgrounds, security interests and traditional relations. ...Today all countries of the region are carrying out structural changes in their economies in order to make a transition to market economy relations. ...This region is rich in energy-generating and other types of natural resources, as well as in intellectual potential which has not yet been fully tapped. Furthermore, in geopolitical terms it is a bridge that links Europe and Asia, and as such will play an important role in international relations. In this sense our region has bright prospects for development.”³⁷

This poster-boy image of Central Asia is not only false but also harmful. As long as the remnants of the Mackinderian Heartland fallacy continue to set the parameters of our thinking about the region, as long as the severe geographical predicament of the region and its inhabitants in the age of globalization is not unequivocally recognized, the peoples of contemporary Central Asia will continue to lose precious time in false starts after false hopes.

³⁵ G. Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-134.

³⁶ G. Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present and Future*, Pinter, London, 1998, p. 151.

³⁷ P. Ochirbat, “Foreword,” in: *Sustainable Development in Central Asia*, ed. by Shirin Akiner, Sander Tideman and Jon Hay, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1998, pp. vii-viii.

V. Globalization and Central Asia's Geographical Predicament

Our vision of Central Asia suffers from an obstinate astigmatism brought about by several and overlapping misconceptions. The survival of themes such as the Heartland, helping to sustain the attribution of an innate vital significance to Central Asia in world politics and economy, may be at the top of the list but there are others as well. For decades we labeled the region as a part of a "Second World"—as it turns out, a term with little descriptive or analytical value—, and now often refer to the countries of Central Asia as "post-communist transition countries," implying that the problems here are not only qualitatively different from the familiar ones in what we have come to know as the Third World, but also merely transitory. The modest oil reserves at the western end of the region have been blown out of all proportion to build fantasies of an oil-rich Central Asia inhabited by people with an affluent future. Suffering from the curse of inaccessibility, Central Asia resembles more a cul-de-sac in a globalizing world, yet we insist on imagining the region as the Great Silk Road, a hub of busy routes connecting the East and the West and the South.

It is imperative to shed this conglomeration of misconceptions and fallacies and try to see where Central Asia actually stands at the threshold of the 21st century: a region unable to overcome the tyranny of its geography and marginalized in a fast globalizing world.

We are often told that in this age of globalization distances mean little and location hardly matters, and are urged to look at how cellular communications networks are on the verge of covering every square meter of the globe, how TV channels broadcast around the world via a network of satellites, how global financial markets are electronically and real-time integrated, etc. Some go as far as bluntly announcing the death of distance.³⁸ What such pundits greatly underplay is the fact that, all the achievements and impact of the communications revolution notwithstanding, globalization is also, and arguably even more so, about production and trade—or should I say production for global trade—of commodities and manufactures. Countries and regions are expected to produce what they can trade in the global market; and the prospects and the extent of that happening is still determined to a considerable degree by geography, by access, by costs of transportation. The claim that communications technologies have neutralized the impact of geography on the economic performance of societies cannot be taken seriously. Just to the contrary, there is a strong argument that economic globalization have in certain ways rendered geography even more important than before.

For some time now, the global volume of trade has been rising at a rate roughly twice the growth of the global economy. World exports of goods and services more than tripled in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as Held *et al.* point out, it "is not just that trade today is greater than ever before. Trade has changed in a way that links national economies together at a

³⁸ Which, actually, is the title of a widely read book by Frances Cairncross, now in its second edition. She makes "goods" (which have the terribly inconvenient trait of not being convertible to electrons for transmission over fiber-optic cables or via satellite) to disappear through some semantic legerdemain ("The old divide between goods and services is giving way to a new divide, between products requiring physical delivery and products that can be delivered on-line" (F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance 2.0.*, Texere, London, 2001, p. 189) and raves throughout the book about a new global economy of "on-line products." It is as if what she renames "products requiring physical delivery" is now something marginal to the global economy, something that is no longer relevant to our lives. In her brave new world of this global on-line economy, geography hardly matters as societies now engage in the production and trade of what she calls "weightless products." Companies can locate pretty much anywhere to run their screen-based activities as long as they find good bargains in skills and productivity, she argues, and offers a magic remedy for development: "Developing countries will increasingly perform on-line services—including monitoring security screens, inputting data and forms, running help-lines, and writing software code—and sell them to the rich countries that generally produce such services domestically» (ibid., p. xi).

deeper level than in the past.” The distinction between international trade and domestic economic activity has been increasingly blurred, a trend further intensified by the growing activities of the transnational corporations: “A quarter to a third of world trade is intrafirm trade between branches of multinationals.”³⁹

There are several factors behind this explosion in global trade and the transnationalization of production. Some of these, such as the declining trade barriers and the “opening up” of more and more countries, have been extensively discussed in the literature. One very important factor, however, has received relatively less attention: the sharply falling cost of moving goods around. As concisely observed in a report on globalization, “behind the scenes, a series of technological innovations, known broadly as ‘containerization’ and ‘inter-modal transportation,’ has led to swift productivity improvements in cargo-handling—and in the process, has lowered one of the biggest obstacles to trade.”⁴⁰ The rather quiet revolution in transportation of goods has been one of the pillars of the global decentralization of production. In Axtmann’s words, “the emergence of a global economic structure is premised on the development of a technological infrastructure regarding transportation and the generation and circulation of information. This infrastructure must provide for faster and more cost-effective rail, sea and air transportation and the establishment of more extensive interconnections between them.”⁴¹

If the international circulation of goods is part and parcel of economic globalization, this circulation, in turn, is made possible by maritime transportation which bears almost the full weight of international trade of goods. During the last three decades of the twentieth century, world seaborne trade tripled from about two billion tons a year to nearly six billion tons. In the big picture, land transportation, even after the improvements affected by inter-modal transportation, serves only in a complementary capacity to seaborne transportation as about 90 percent of internationally traded goods is carried in ships. The significance of this fundamental reliance of the global economy on maritime transportation for those regions without easy access to ports cannot be overstated.

For millennia land transportation has suffered from a distinct disadvantage compared to waterborne alternatives in long-distance trade, except in the rare circumstances when luxury items such as silk and spices rendered certain land routes profitable enough. In the time of the Roman Empire, it cost less to ship grain across the entire Mediterranean than to move it overland for some 100 kilometers.⁴² Land transportation has never been able to close that gap; for all the remarkable improvements in land transportation (especially in the last century and a half, with the railroads and motor vehicles), the improvements in sea transportation have been even more drastic. As we enter the 21st century, with a few exceptions neither land nor air transportation can offer anywhere near the cost-efficiency of maritime transportation for long-distance trade of goods. As Hausmann notes, “Shipping a standard container from Baltimore to the Ivory Coast costs about \$3,000, while sending that same container to the landlocked Central African Republic costs \$13,000.”⁴³

The perplexing thing is that in promoting global decentralization of production, the economic orthodoxy of our era simply assumes that a Central African Republic is in the same position as any coastal country to take advantage of what the contemporary transportation technology has to offer. As a consequence, the neoliberal recipes can neither in theory nor in practice cope with situations where serious and debilitating access problems exist.

³⁹ D. Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, J. Perraton, “Globalization,” *Global Governance*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1999, pp. 490-492.

⁴⁰ *The Economist*, 15 November, 1997, pp. 85-86.

⁴¹ R. Axtmann, “Globalization, Europe and the State: Introductory Reflections,” in: *Globalization and Europe: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. by R. Axtmann, Pinter, London, 1998, p. 4.

⁴² See: M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1973, p. 126, citing an earlier work by A.H.M. Jones regarding an edict by emperor Diocletianus (reigned between 284-306 AD).

⁴³ R. Hausmann, “Prisoners of Geography,” *Foreign Policy*, January-February, 2001, p. 7.

The prevailing trade theory takes it for granted that goods move rapidly and with little cost from place to place. Paul Krugman drew attention to this problem over a decade ago: “The analysis of international trade makes virtually no use of insights from economic geography or location theory. We normally model countries as dimensionless points within which factors of production can be instantly and costlessly moved from one activity to another, and even trade among countries is usually given a sort of spaceless representation in which transport costs are zero for all goods that can be traded. ...[T]he tendency of international economists to turn a blind eye to the fact that countries both occupy and exist in space—a tendency so deeply entrenched that we rarely even realize we are doing it—has, I would submit, had some serious costs.”⁴⁴ Krugman then called on his profession to “admit to ourselves that space matters and try to bring geography back into economic analysis,”⁴⁵ but his call has so far had only a limited effect.

The “geographic-blindness” common among so many economists manifests itself frequently in studies involving Central Asia. Quite typical are the attempts to account for the economic hardships in Central Asia almost exclusively in terms of the effects of the disintegration of the Soviet economy aggravated by insufficient implementation of economic liberalization reforms.⁴⁶

Jeffrey Sachs, one of the best-known gurus of market reforms in the so-called transition countries, to his credit recognized that there are situations where geography overwhelms policy. In a 1997 article reaching a wide audience,⁴⁷ he drew attention to the predicament of “those countries dealt a weak hand by geography” in the age of globalizing capitalism. “For the first time in history, almost all of the world’s people are bound together in a global capitalist system,” he observed. “In the past, differences in policies across regions of the world resulted in vast differences in economic performance; in the future, policies are likely to be more similar. As a result, large parts of the developing world will narrow the income gap between themselves and richer nations. But this process of convergence, by itself, will go only so far. With or without markets, many developing countries will be left far behind. Adam Smith understood the limits of convergence, and the role that geography plays in defining those limits, better than many modern economists.” Despite his faith in globalizing capitalism in general and his conviction that it leads to economic prosperity across the globe, he admitted to a big exception: “...for much of the world, bad climates, poor soils and physical isolation are likely to hinder growth whatever happens to policy.”⁴⁸

In a 2001 article appropriately titled “Prisoners of Geography,” Ricardo Hausmann discussed the question of geography even more bluntly than Sachs and is worth quoting here at length. “Economic-development experts promise that with the correct mix of pro-market policies, poor countries will eventually prosper. But policy isn’t the problem—geography is,” he argued. “The countries left behind have distinguishing geographical characteristics: They tend to be located in the tropical regions or, because of their location, face large transportation costs in accessing world

⁴⁴ P. Krugman, *Geography and Trade*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Examples are far too many to cite but I would like to make an exception by mentioning a study by two senior World Bank economists (M. de Melo, A. Gelb, “A Comparative Analysis of Twenty-Eight Transition Economies in Europe and Asia,” *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 1996) who assessed twenty-eight “transition economies” and tried to account for the differences in economic performance among them by the different intensities and timing of “liberalizing reforms,” because it was ironic that an article that so utterly ignored geography and location was published in the journal *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*.

⁴⁷ See: J. Sachs, “The Limits of Convergence: Nature, Nurture and Growth,” *The Economist*, 14 June, 1997, pp. 19-22.

⁴⁸ Between his enthusiasm about global capitalism as “the most promising institutional arrangement for worldwide prosperity” on the one hand, and his recognition of the constraints imposed by geography on the other, Sachs is forced to engage in a balancing act: his expressions of optimism are often followed by bleak reservations. “Capitalism has now become common property. So too can economic prosperity become common property,” he suggests, “at least for those regions not impeded by fundamental geographical barriers.” He believes Asia’s prospects to be bright, but immediately excludes Central Asia which “faces profound, and largely unsolved, geographical obstacles.”

markets—or both.”⁴⁹ “Nations with populations far from a coastline,” he observed, “tend to be poorer and show lower rates of economic growth than coastal countries. ... That means, for example, that the post-Soviet republics will experience as much difficulty battling their geographical disadvantages as they will overcoming the aftereffects of communism.”⁵⁰ Hausmann too points out the importance given to “access to markets” by Adam Smith, the “prophet” of economic liberalism, and discusses the implications: “For Adam Smith, productivity gains achieved through specialization are the secret to the wealth of nations. But for these gains to materialize, producers must have access to markets where they can sell their specialized output and buy other goods. The larger the market, the greater the scope for specialization. In today’s global marketplace, most industrial products require inputs from various locations around the world. Therefore, if transportation costs are high, local companies will be at a disadvantage in accessing the imported inputs they need and in getting their own goods to foreign markets.

“Unfortunately, transportation costs are often determined by a country’s geography. A recent study found that shipping goods over 1 additional kilometer of land costs as much as shipping them over 7 extra kilometers of sea. Maritime shipping is particularly suited to the bulky, low-value-added goods that developing nations tend to produce; therefore, countries lacking cheap access to the sea will be shut out of many potential markets. ... Land transportation is especially costly for landlocked countries whose products need to cross borders, which are a much more costly hurdle than previously thought.”⁵¹

It is important to recognize that economic globalization is a geographically uneven process, and that this unevenness is not accidental or at random. As Roland Axtmann points out, entire regions and countries around the world remain marginalized within the global economy; they are deemed “structurally irrelevant” in the new pattern of international division of labor.⁵² Although sometimes the main cause of such marginalization may be social and political (as in areas with collapsed states such as Liberia or Haiti), most of the time it has to do with geographical factors, especially resources and access. While the freight revolution may come as a blessing for the “liberalizing” countries in the favored zones of global economy especially for those with easy access to open seas, it puts the backwater zones at a greater than ever disadvantage.

The proponents of the neoliberal gospel single-mindedly advocating an outward-oriented economic strategy based on market liberalism and comparative advantage are very hard pressed to identify what comparative advantages Central Asia actually commands so as to successfully integrate itself to the mainstream of globalizing capitalism.

Richard Pomfret, a prolific writer on the economy of post-Soviet Central Asia, implicitly reveals the very implausibility of the promise of neoliberal salvation. After urging the Central Asian countries to follow the neoliberal recipe by undertaking the requisite market reforms in a 1995 book, he cannot altogether evade the question of “then what?” His response tacitly admits to a lack of answers and exposes the feebleness of the neoliberal stand: “Indeed, they could not compete on low wage costs with the large transition economies of China and Vietnam. The international evidence, however, is that low wages are not the only basis for export-led growth. The point of outward-oriented growth is to maximize economic well-being by pursuing comparative advantage. Economists may be poor predictors of where detailed comparative advantage lies for most countries, but that does not matter because the market will give the answer if it is allowed to.”⁵³

⁴⁹ R. Hausmann, op. cit., pp. 45-46.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁵² See: R. Axtmann, op. cit., p. 3.

⁵³ R. Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, p. 134.

The corner Pomfret puts himself into is quite a crowded one: pretty much everybody who offers market liberalism as a panacea for the region's problems end up there. What they are in effect telling Central Asians is: We cannot really figure out what exactly are the comparative advantages of Central Asia in this fast globalizing world, but don't let that lead you into questioning the path. Fix your gaze on the "tigers" of the Asian Pacific, put your faith in the "market," do what the neoliberal gospel says, and lo and behold you will be delivered—somehow! This is no economics, but hollow evangelism.

So far only a few have raised their voices against these "evangelists" and tried to bring a measure of reason into the discussion. Pointing out that most economic experts and policymakers in Central Asia hold a fascination for the export-driven economic models of East Asia, Sander Tideman wrote, for instance: "Focusing on statistics alone, one easily overlooks the fact that the East Asian growth countries had very different characteristics to start with, such as large reserves of cheap labor, some basic infrastructure (harbors and other transportation facilities), relatively easy access to foreign capital, ties with richer overseas ethnic communities and—above all—an advantageous geographical location. Central Asian nations are landlocked, have few transportation facilities, restrictive physical conditions and little capital and labor, and most distinctively, have fragile soils."⁵⁴

Sadly, considerably more people seem to have chosen instead to listen to those who are engaged in building a mirage based on two prevalent dogmas: the Mackinderian one that Central Asia has vast resources of great global significance, and the neoliberal one that economic liberalization is a panacea to problems of development irrespective of geography. These two articles of faith, despite their distinct genealogies, have come to conveniently complement each other in much of the literature on contemporary Central Asia,⁵⁵ and their confluence weigh heavily upon current perceptions of the region and its prospects. Mackinder's fallacious premises of a century earlier are still stubbornly maintained, except now it is transnational corporations that will presumably succeed where the Russian state has ostensibly failed.

What, then, are the options available to the peoples of Central Asia? I do not pretend to have any ready answers, and obviously there are no easy ones. What I want to emphasize is that if feasible strategies are ever to be developed, it is crucial to start searching sooner rather than later by recognizing the stark geographical realities of the region in a rapidly changing world. The tyranny of the region's geography cannot be possibly overcome without first facing up to it. An excellent starting point is dismantling the prevalent myths and the neoliberal wishful thinking which have jointly managed to divert the agenda and postpone the essential debate.

⁵⁴ S.G. Tideman, "The Shortcomings of the Classical Economic Model: Appropriate Economic Parameters are Required for Sustainable Development in Central Asia," in: *Sustainable Development in Central Asia*, ed. by Shirin Akiner, Sander Tideman and Jon Hay, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1998, p. 85.

⁵⁵ For a typical example, see Zbigniew Brzezinski's widely-read 1997 book. After paying due tribute to Mackinder, Brzezinski keeps repeating the assertion that the region possesses vast natural resources, and trusts the United States with the task "...to help ensure that no single power comes to control this geopolitical space and that the global community has unhindered financial and economic access to it" (Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 148). He proceeds to envision "large-scale international investment in an increasingly accessible Caspian-Central Asian region" and "accelerated regional development, funded by external investment" (ibid., p. 203).