

H. J. MACKINDER'S HEARTLAND THEORY: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The word "geo-politics" expresses the geography of political relations, particularly those of international politics. It is the offshoot of both geography and political science. It entered the English language as a loose translation of "geopolitik", a term coined in the interwar period, 1919-1939, to denote mobilization of a real knowledge for purposes of state in short, geo-policy. Geo-politicians hold that international relations and internal condition are governed by geographical, factors. These geographical features influence military situations, which, in turn, influence national policy. In the pursuit of national policy, military policy is an instrument. It would be in this context the author will analyze Mackinder theory of heartland.

Key Words: geo-politics, Pivot Area, Heartland, Strategic Heartland.

THE THEORY

In the first decade of the twentieth century, attempts were made by geographers to show the relationships between the larger geographical and the larger historical generalizations and, then, to work on a formula of geographical causation in universal history. Mackinder one of the first geographers to systematically show how historical developments had been guided by geographical factors. Much attention has been drawn to hypotheses derived from the global and regional configuration of lands and seas. These include Mahan's sea-power interpretation of history; Mackinder's hypothesis of a trend towards a world empire based on the heartland of Eurasia, Huntington, Wheeler and Mill's hypotheses of climatic variations;¹ and Blount and Sprout's hypotheses linking technology with demographic distribution to produce the production that international political patterns will be ultimately determined by the latter.²

He stated that the Columbian epoch of 400 years of discovery and colonization of non-European regions was drawing to a close and that this cessation of worldwide exploration signaled the establishment of a closed

political system in which the railroad and other mechanical transports were already definitely altering the relative strength of land and sea power.³

His study of the physical map of the world led Mackinder to believe that the world was conceived of one land mass. He called it the World Island and suggested that it consisted of Europe, Asia and Africa. He regarded the British and Japanese islands as off shore islands and the North and South Americas and Australia as outlying islands. He noted that three fourths of the earth's surface was water and only one fourth was land. Of this one fourth, two-thirds were accounted for by the World Island and only a third was covered by the remaining continents. He then went on to submit that out of the total population, the World Island accounted for seven eighths and the rest of the continents, one eighth.

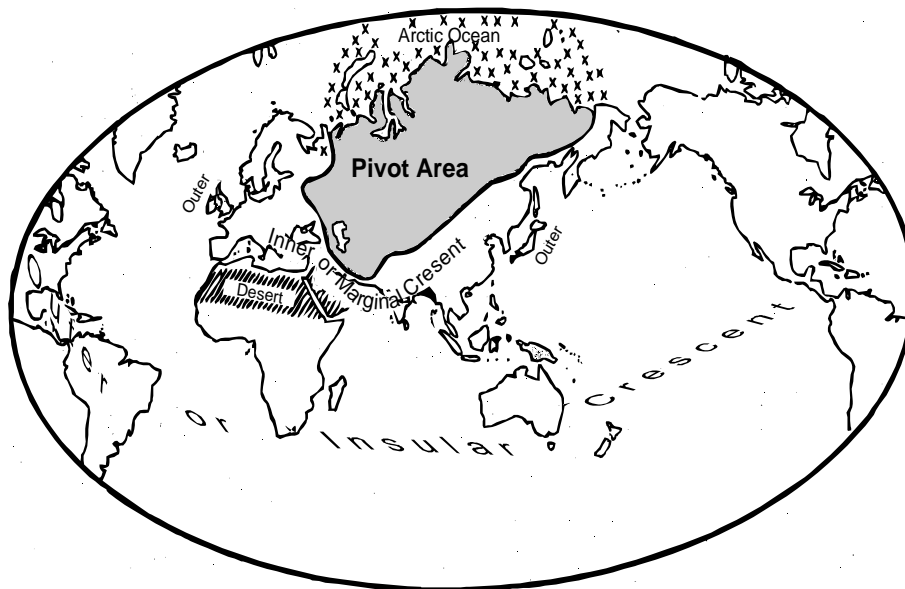


Fig. 1

Mackinder divided the world into three main areas : (Fig. 1)

1. Pivot Area Heartland ;
2. Inner Crescent or Marginal ; and
3. Outer Crescent.

1. Pivot Area Heartland. Mackinder defined the Heartland as a vast area of interior and Arctic drainage located in inner Eurasia. It is surrounded by mountains on three-sides and by the ice-bound Arctic on the fourth. It stretches from the Volga river in the west to eastern Siberia in the east and from the Himalayas and related

mountains in the south to the Arctic in the north. It covered about 9 million sq. miles or more than twice the area of Europe. Strategically, the area, as conceived by Mackinder, is like a fortress. However, the Heartland is vulnerable to land forces in the southwest through eastern Europe, between the Ural mountains and the Caspian sea, where a narrow corridor, covered by steppe grasslands, offered easy entry.

2. Inner or Marginal Crescent. The inner or marginal land of Eurasia surrounds the Pivot area on its west, south and east. Mackinder called it inner or marginal crescent. It forms a circular arch of coastland of Eurasia from Scandinavia to Manchuria and is characterised by drainage into navigable seas. The marginal crescent consists of the whole of Europe except its Russian part – North Africa and most of the Middle East and the monsoon lands of Asia-India, southeast Asia and the Far East.

3. Outer or Insular Crescent. In Mackinder's geopolitical considerations of the world, the outer or insular crescent includes North America, South America, South Africa and Australia. He also regarded the island regions of Great Britain and Japan as part of this area because of their complete insularity from the mainland of Eurasia.

Mackinder argued that Europe's historical development had resulted from Asia and modern Europe was the product of resistance and reaction to pressure from Asia. The pressure from Asia culminated in invasions ever since the days of the nomads. It reached its peak with the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. These raids were generally carried out from the Central land mass of eastern Eurasia, a region which constitutes almost half of the total land area of the globe. The area was wholly inaccessible from the sea, and because of its steppe nature, offered little obstacle to internal movement by land. Mackinder attempted to show that the power that controls led the region of Eurasia and would also enjoy the most favourable conditions for controlling the rest of the world.

Prior to the Columbian era of overland transport and communication the pivot region of steppe grasslands with the exception of the sub-Arctic forest, was suitable to the movement of horsemen and camel borne men. Strategically, the region was superior to the lands of the inner crescent. It was this that made possible the "cloud of ruthless and idealess horsemen sweeping over the unimpeded plain – a blow as it were from the great Asiatic hammer striking freely through the vacant space."

History, to Mackinder, was geography in motion. He studied its meaning in a wider perspective. He saw history as the story of the movement of the landlocked peoples in the plains of Eastern Europe, Western and Central Asia against the inhabitants of the littoral areas of the Eurasian mass. He noted that mobility upon Ocean

effectively challenged the mobility of the horse and the camel in the heart of the continent. This development neutralised the strategical advantage of the steppe nomads. The political impact of the sea revolution was to reverse the relations of Europe and Asia.” Mackinder stated that “whereas in the Middle Ages Europe was caged between an impassable desert to the south, an unknown ocean to the east, and icy or forested wastes to the north and north-east, and in the east and south-east was constantly threatened by the superior mobility of the horsemen and camelmen, she now emerged upon the world, multiplying more than thirty-fold the sea surface and coastal plains to which she had access, and wrapping her influence round the Euro-Asiatic land power which had hitherto threatened her very existence.”⁴

Mackinder however, felt that this shift of balance was only temporary in nature. Elaborating, he said that transcontinental railways had transmitted the conditions of land power and its effect was clearly seen in the closed heartland of Euro Asia, in vast areas where neither timber nor inaccessible stone was available for road making. Railways would work the greater wonder in the steppe, he observed, as they would replace horse and camel mobility. He believed that the time was not far when the whole of Asia would relish the benefit of railways. He stated 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. There have been and are here the conditions of a mobility of military and economic power of a far-reaching and yet limited character. Russia replaces the Mongol empire. Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India and on China replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen. In the world at large, she occupies the central strategical position held by Germany in Europe. She can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides. The full development of her modern railway mobility is merely a matter of time.⁵

Mackinder emphasized that the new mobility of these land-locked peoples would permit them to expand to and incorporate the marginal lands of Eurasia, and that with these vast continental resources for fleet construction, a world empire was in sight. It should be noted that Mackinder did not depreciate sea power but exemplified his theory in a world map by stressing on the concept of a Eurasian Heartland. For more than three centuries, Britain was known for constructing a worldwide empire, but in the 20th century, Britain as a global sea power could not again become “mistress of seas”.⁶

RE-EXAMINATION OF MACKINDER'S THEORY OF HEARTLAND

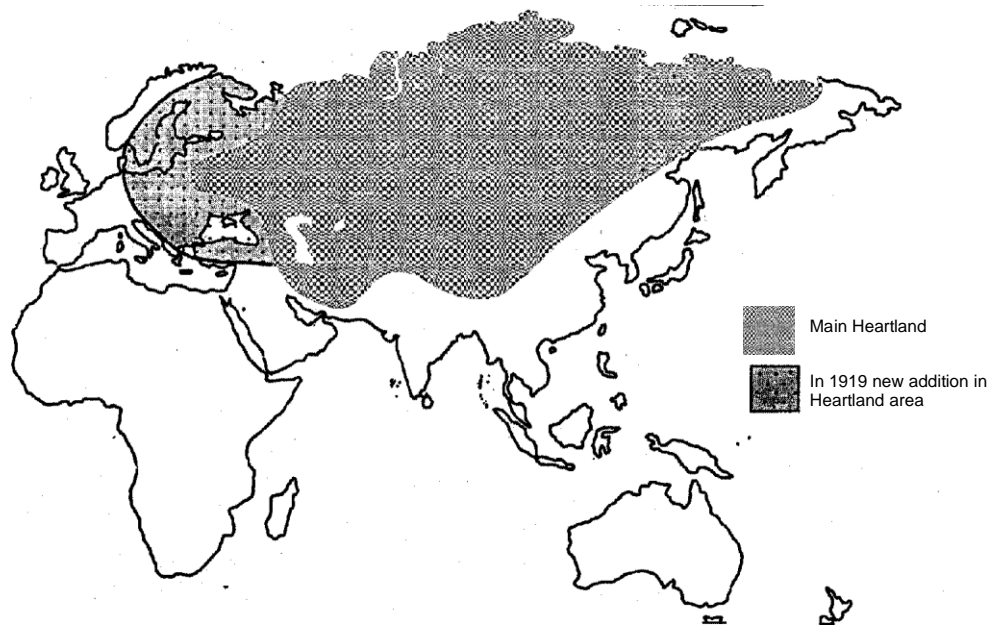


Fig. 2. Modified concept of Strategic Heartland

Modified concept of Strategic Heartland: (Fig. 2) In 1919, Mackinder re-examined his ideas in “Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction”. It is known as the modified concept of “Strategic Heartland”. He reaffirmed his belief in the key significance of the Heartland and its invulnerability to sea power. The purpose of the book was to warn and instruct the statesmen of the allied powers. With the defeat of Germany, a different political and military situation had emerged. The main problem at the time was how to conclude a peace treaty with the Axis powers. The collapse of the Russian empire in 1917, a peace accord between new communist leaders and Germany, and the failure of the British navy to maintain its supremacy proved that sea power was incapable of controlling a vast area of the World Islands. From the strategic viewpoints, therefore, the theory Heartland, rather than sea power became important in Eurasian politics. Mackinder’s theory included the Baltic Sea and the lower Danube, the Black sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet and Mongolia.

Moreover, in 1917, when the German armies had advanced through the steppe corridor of south-western Russia, Mackinder felt that it was necessary for the Allied powers to lay significance on the strategic importance of the East European gate of entry into the Heartland. He, therefore, urged the peacemakers to introduce a cordon of independent states to separate Germany and the Heartland. His efforts in this regard included the famous warning: “when our statesmen (at Versailles) are in conversation with the defeated enemy, some airy cherub should whisper to them from time to time saying:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands, the World Islands: who rules the World Island commands the world.”⁷

Midland Basin: In 1943, Mackinder again reassessed his theory and came up with the concept of the “Midland Basin”. He recognised Western Europe and the United States as physical complements to each other as they were the balancing halves of a single community.⁸ The Midland Basin, as conceived by him, comprised the North Atlantic Ocean, the eastern United States and Western Europe. Significantly, in the process of reconfiguration, he divided his original heartland into two: Heartland Russia to the west of the Yenisei River, and a supporting area of large, natural reserves to the east which he called “Lenaland” after the Lena river running through its centre. He regarded this region as of little economic value because of its rugged topography and forest cover. He thought that the Midland Basin could act as an effective check to the growing political power potential of the Eurasian Heartlands, especially considering that the Second World War had drastically changed the politico geographic picture of the world. He asserted, “if the Soviet Union emerges from this war as conqueror of Germany, she must rank as the greatest land power of the Globe. Moreover, she will be the power in the strategically strongest defensive position. The Heartland is the greatest natural fortress on earth. For the first time in history it is manned by a garrison sufficient both in number and quality.”⁹ It is worth noting that, the Soviet Union did emerge as the greatest land power after the humiliating defeat of Germany in World War II. The German defeat transformed the Heartland region from a power vacuum to a power centre.

ANALYSIS OF MACKINDER’S THEORY

Mackinder contributed immensely to the development of global strategic thinking. To him, the political and economic interests of Britain were of paramount importance. He saw that the British policy of free trade based on simple accumulation of capital was no longer sufficient to meet the challenges posed by Germany’s massive growth in heavy industry. Tariff barriers and a protectionist economy policy were urgently needed to maintain British industry, he felt. These concerns, inevitably, found expression in Mackinder’s global model.

Mackinder was a source of inspiration to many German geopoliticians. They evolved a theory of growth and empire built on expanding land power. The most important of the German geopoliticians was Karl Haushofer. He regarded “the Geographical Pivot of History” as a truly¹⁰ grandiose description of world policy compressed into few pages. “Haushofer and his fellowmen accepted Mackinder’s view as a god-sent solution to Germany’s world political dilemma. Mackinder’s land-power interpretation of history seemed to best apply to the potentialities of the German state as a great power.

Though Mackinder's theory has become an integral part of political geography, yet both in respect of facts and ideas, it has been intensely debated. Among its prominent critics are N.J. Spykman, D.W. Meinig, J.M. Hooson, AR Hall, Norman J.G. Pound and W.G. East. D.W. Meinig was more critical of Mackinder and Spykman's conceptions as regards the Heartland and the Rimland. He emphasized on the dynamic and functional aspects of the Heartland-Rimland relationship. Mackinder and Spykman he said, had viewed the contemporary power dynamics of their times from a limited perspective. Their theories, as a result, received a setback with the advancement of communication technology. Meinig wrote, "our definitions of Heartland and Rimland must be rooted in cultural or functional criteria." As such, the Heartland should be based on a broad similarity of physical conditions, basically similar cultures, and an interior nodal position having the link of historic land routes. This would interconnect various ancient centres of civilization on the oceanic margins of Eurasia. This approach was contrary to Mackinder's marked emphasis on the hydrographic definition of the Heartland.

Similarly, Meinig suggested that, on a functional basis, the Rimland should be divided into two segments, one inner-oriented and the other outer-oriented. He regarded the inner-oriented segment as "continental Rimland" and the outer-oriented one as "maritime Rimland". He noted that Mackinder's theory would have carried more weight if it had taken into consideration the dynamic criterion of functional orientation within the Rimland. However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the post-cold war developments have rendered the distinction of little contemporary importance.

In recent times, critics have challenged the validity of Mackinder's explanation of global strategy in terms of a Mercator projection map. The Mercator world shows a Siberian Heartland fringed by Russia, Europe, Africa, India and China to form the world Island, which, in turn, is flanked on the left by Great Britain and the Americas and on the right by Japan, Malaysia and Australia. However, in the Heartland region, the Mercator map distorts the picture as seen on a globe. The Americas do not flank the Heartland; they are joined by the polar ice cap to the main mass of Asia. The Arctic sea contracts and is but slightly larger than the Mediterranean Sea. In consequence, if the strategical concept of the Heartland is accepted as including all regions which can be denied to sea power, then to Euro-Asia must surely be added the Arctic ice and part of North America, particularly as air comes to the assistance of ground in opening up previously inaccessible areas.

Aviation, while adding a third and important medium of mobility, has also tended to change the picture. Though it augments the internal mobility of the Heartland, it also destroys the barrier of the polar ocean and makes Euro-Asia vulnerable from the north to air power, as aircraft can fly over the Pole from bases in North America. However, it remains true that though Mackinder's Heartland is open to air attack from the north and,

indeed, from most directions – the prospect of a successful invasion which must depend on land and sea power is remote.

Moreover, Mackinder's prediction about the role of land power did not come true, except in the case of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, prior to its collapse in 1989, exercised tremendous influence over Eastern Europe. His first dictum, "who rules East Europe commands the Heartland's" favoured the Soviet Union and its satellites in the 1950s and enabled realisation of the desired Soviet goal, i.e. the domination of the Eurasian continent. The development of railways and air power further extended Soviet influence over inner Asia. In this way, the Soviet Union could match the internal development by an increasing outward pressure. In due course, the Soviet Union was able to tighten its hold over a ring of satellites on its western and southern frontiers. Its influence was seen in China, Korea and South-East Asia. Road and rail development in Turkestan and the Uzbek and Pamir areas indicated greater outward pressure to come.

The validity of Mackinder's second dictum "who rules the Heartland commands, the World Island" is more open to criticism. If a nation's strength were to be judged by its industrial and manpower potential, then a power based on the Heartland alone would have, poor prospects, of expanding its empire. History is full of examples of this. King Charles XII of Sweeden invaded Russia, but after initial success, was defeated in the Battle of Poltawa in 1709. Similarly, the expansionist designs of Napoleon and Hitler in 1812 and in World War II, respectively, were gradually worn down by the large size of the country (Russia) and the logistic difficulties that posed. On the contrary, though the Soviet Union in the 1950's succeeded in controlling the affairs of the East European countries, it could not set out with confidence on a policy of world conquest. The prime reason for this was its failure to control the population and resources of Western Europe. Moreover, inadequate resources made it more difficult for the Soviet Union to command the other marginal regions and so rule the World Island. Even at that time, ongoing changes called for a concept of a Heartland larger than Mackinder's original pivot state before rule over the World Island could be established. At first it seemed that Sino-Soviet closeness presented an attractive alternative to Europe, but internal compulsions and ideological differences prevented unification of the World Island.

In spite of all these criticisms levelled against Mackinder, the Heartland region appears to occupy a permanent place in global politics. Mackinder's concept of "The Geographical Pivot of History" had drawn attention to a fundamental relationship in the political history of the old world. His concept of the joint landmass of Eurasia and Africa as the World Island has, in some ways, captured the essence of the post-Columbian reality of our world. The strategic importance of the pivot region is destined to remain a permanent factor in global

political and economic relationships, even though this region is neither the pivot nor the Heartland in the manner Mackinder had originally envisaged.

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