

Geopolitics and US Middle Eastern Policy: Mackinder and Brzezinski

US President Barack Obama's speech to the Muslim world in Cairo marked the opening of a new chapter in US foreign policy. The president reiterated the notion that the US is not in a struggle with Islam as a religion but with a fringe group of fanatics that murder in the name of Islam.

He promised a whole new engagement in the Middle East, proposing a new development strategy that covers education, science and health. Together with his emphasis on the duties of the Palestinians and Israelis to rejuvenate the peace process, Obama's goal seemed to be to offer the Muslim world a new beginning.

There is, however, much reason to remain skeptical about the extent to which the US is able and willing to change its interventionist practices that have caused much frustration on the "Muslim street". The fact remains that the Middle East and Central Asia, home to some 300 million Muslims, is of vital interest to the US. In order to understand the importance of the region for a superpower on an entirely different continent, one has to take a look at the classic political literature that has influenced American leaders.

This newsletter sheds light on the theoretical and ideological groundings of American geopolitical thought with reference to two prominent scholars in the field: Halford Mackinder and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

1.1 Mackinder's Heartland

The works of Halford Mackinder, famous geographer and political scientist, are a good starting point. In his 1904 essay "*The Geographical Pivot of History*" Mackinder postulated his famous "heartland theory", which argued that "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the World".

Mackinder's theory was a counter-argument to notions that maritime supremacy was sufficient for a power such as Great Britain to safeguard its hegemony. He claimed that, with the emergence of new transportation routes and technology, a power that could control the center (and the abundant resources) of the Eurasian landmass, as well as its entry point in Eastern Europe, would ultimately be able to attack the colonies of a sea power everywhere on the continent. This would enable such a power to control the World Island (Eurasia and Africa) and ultimately to extend its influence to the rest of the world.

Some aspects of his theory have clearly lost their relevance: Mackinder's appreciation of the importance of the Arabian peninsula was predictably patchy, while his tendency to be overly Eurocentric was a key weakness. The importance of the Eurasian continent as a whole, however, has not been diminished: home to most of the world's remaining fossil fuel resources, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf in particular are of vital importance to any power with global ambitions.

This holds especially true for the US – a fact that hasn't escaped the political leaders of the only remaining superpower.

1.2 Brzezinski's Chess Game

In his 1997 book "*The Grand Chessboard*", former national security advisor under the Carter administration and informal Obama advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski highlights the importance of Eurasia for global US primacy. Drawing heavily on Mackinder's theory he states:

"Geopolitics has moved from the regional to the global dimension, with preponderance over the entire Eurasian continent serving as the central basis for global primacy. The United States, a non-Eurasian power, now enjoys international primacy, with its power directly deployed on three peripheries of the Eurasian continent [...]. But it is on the globe's most important playing field – Eurasia – that a potential rival to America might at some point arise". (Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1997): *The Grand Chessboard*. P.39)

From Brzezinski's point of view, to retain its supremacy in Eurasia, the US has to prevent potential rivals, such as Russia, China, Iran and Turkey from gaining control or influence in the region.

Since the Cold War, the US has maintained a strong presence in what Brzezinski calls "continental bridgeheads" that enabled it to contain the Soviet threat during the Cold War. One such bridgehead on the southern front was the wider Middle Eastern region. The US assistance of the *mujahidin* in the Soviet- Afghan war was a move that was designed to check the southward expansion of Soviet influence on the continent. Indeed all past interventions in Muslim countries of the Middle East during the Cold War, including the 1953 coup d'état against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq of Iran, can be seen as a checking of Soviet influence.

Since the geopolitical aspirations of Russia and Iran in Central Asia have become obvious during the past few years, the geostrategic importance of the Middle East for the US has only increased. The regional bridgehead still stands: Israel, a close ally of the US still has the best equipped armed forces in the region and the US now maintains a military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and Qatar. It is therefore in a formidable position to check the excessive geopolitical aspirations of other players in the region.

With all the hopes of a new multilateralism that includes the Muslim world, it is clear that the US will hold on to its presence and influence in the Middle East. There should also be no doubt about the willingness of the US to use its hard power to ensure its continuity. After all, if one believes in Mackinder - and many American strategic thinkers do – nothing less than world domination is at stake.

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1.3 Resources

1.3.1 International Organizations

NATO in Afghanistan: Security and Development, by the US Mission to NATO
This website provides an overview of NATO operations in Afghanistan.

1.3.2 Nongovernmental Organizations

Central Asia, by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
On this website, Carnegie scholars in Moscow and Washington examine the process of political and economic transition in Central Asia, the region's role in global energy markets, and the regional balance of power.

1.3.3 Research and Academia

Democratic Ideals and Reality, by Halford Mackinder
E-book of Mackinder's major work containing his geopolitical theories.

Can America Find a Grand Strategy, by Stephen Krasner
A Video Lecture by Stanford University Professor Stephen Krasner on US Grand Strategy held at Cornell University dealing with US Grand Strategy.

Geopolitics of the High North: What is Geopolitics? by the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies
A program led by the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies that includes international partners and deals with geopolitical issues in the northern polar region. The "What is Geopolitics?" section contains a lot of theoretical background information on geopolitics.

The Emerging Pattern of Geopolitics, by Peter W. Rodman, Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College (SSI)
This paper discusses security challenges to the US within a framework of both an Islamist challenge rising from the jihadi movement across the Muslim world and in the dynamics of the rise and decline of great powers.

Geopolitical Analysis of the Eurasian Corridor, by International Relations and Security Network, Centre for Security Studies (CSS), Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich)
This dossier provides an overview of geopolitical trends in five Central Asia states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), and three Southern Caucasus States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). The author examines in depth the degree to which international politics, terrorism, the environment, health issues and natural resource wealth and poverty provides challenges the peace and stability of states in the region.

Iran and the New Geopolitics of Oil: An Annotated Bibliography, by Luke Patey, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)

This paper provides an extensive resource base for research on Iran and the geopolitics of oil, particularly as it relates to Iranian-American relations.

Geopolitics, Grand Strategy and the Bush Doctrine, by Simon Dalby, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS/RSIS)

This paper examines the geopolitical reasoning behind the Bush Doctrine and provides insights into the strategic outlook of the Bush administration in the war on terror.

1.3.4 Media

The New Rules of the Game, BBC Podcast

In this three-part series, the BBC's Diplomatic Correspondent Jonathan Marcus explores the fundamental shifts in the global system since the end of the Cold War.

Central Asia's Complex Geopolitics, Middle East Times

In this article, Mark N. Katz, professor of government and politics at George Mason University explores the actions of Russia, US and China in Central Asia and discusses the role natural resources play in the competition.