



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

July 2013

## GEOPOLITICS REBORN

By Colin Dueck



*Colin Dueck is a Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and an Associate Professor in George Mason University's Department of Public and International Affairs. He is the author of *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton, 2010) and *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, 2006). An earlier version of this essay appeared in the *Claremont Review of Books* (Spring 2013) and is used with permission.*

Ever since the United States became the world's only superpower over twenty years ago, there has been a tendency to lose sight of the geopolitical conditions underlying American national security. We have been told that economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, technological change, global democratization, the rise of non-state actors, and Barack Obama's personality will have a transformational effect on world affairs, rendering irrelevant the traditional patterns of international power politics. Yet none of these nostrums have had the fully pacifying impact promised by their most enthusiastic advocates, and we are left drifting into an era where geopolitical competition between major world powers obviously continues, without a firm understanding of it on the part of Western opinion.

The word geopolitics is often taken by liberals especially to have a kind of reactionary, outmoded, or even sinister quality. In reality, geopolitics is simply the analysis of the relationship between geographical facts on the one hand, and international politics on the other. These geographical facts include essentially unchanging natural features, such as rivers, mountains, and oceans, along with elements of human and political geography such as national boundaries, trade networks, and concentrations of economic or military power. In other words, geopolitical conditions are the facts on the ground, prior to our policy decisions. As such, a refusal to recognize or understand geopolitical factors in world politics is not so much ethical, as foolish - like an insistence on playing chess without learning the rules.

Classical geopolitical analyses contain a number of enduring truths, as follows. The international system is a competitive arena in which great powers play a disproportionate role, struggling for security, resources, position and influence. Military force is a critical indicator and fundament of that influence. Given their essential autonomy, states fear their own encirclement by other powers, and try to break out of it through strategies of counter-encirclement. The realities of geography and material capability set very definite constraints on foreign policy decision-makers which they ignore at their peril. At the same time, there is considerable room for human agency and political leadership to respond to these constraints and defend worthwhile values with skill, courage, and success. Despite technological and institutional changes over the years, these underlying features of world politics have never really changed all that much. This is one reason the study of history is instructive for statesmen. What has changed, among other things, is the specific distribution of power within the international system. Today, it is China's economic and military power that is rising, not only on land, but at sea. Yet the basic patterns of its rise are not entirely without precedent. So it is appropriate that we go back to the classical geopolitical theorists, to deepen our understanding of current international trends and how to manage them. Three such classical theorists in particular stand out: Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, and Nicholas Spykman.

U.S. admiral Alfred Mahan was the preeminent theorist of maritime power in world politics. Disturbed by the lack of governmental or popular attention to the state of the U.S. Navy, in 1890 he published his greatest work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. In it, he argues that sea power is central to the rise and decline of great nations. Sea power is defined by Mahan as not simply a strong navy - although it certainly includes that - but also a national orientation toward the ocean, in terms of geographical position, commercial shipping, maritime production, and intelligent policies. The military essence of sea power, for Mahan, is the concentrated possession of numerous capital ships, with well-trained and aggressive crews, capable of defeating enemy navies in battle. The possession of such naval forces, when properly led, carries the immeasurable benefit of driving the enemy's fleet and commerce from the open seas. Mahan refers to this type of naval predominance as command of the sea. In wartime, command of the sea allows for maritime powers to intervene decisively on land, whether through naval blockade, or in direct support of allied armies. In peacetime, command of the sea allows for the operation of friendly maritime trade, which in turn gathers wealth to finance the maintenance of the navy. Maritime shipping, a strong navy, and the benefits of seaborne commerce thus operate in a kind of virtuous circle for the leading naval powers, giving them a great advantage over nations whose capabilities are bound mainly to the land.

Mahan argued that the self-reinforcing nature of sea power was best demonstrated in modern times by the rise of Great Britain, which defeated the navies of Spain, Holland, and France in turn, and rose to worldwide preeminence through command of the sea. But he worried that modern democracies were not sufficiently attuned to the necessity of maintaining sea power. His own United States, in particular, he viewed as preoccupied with internal matters, and neglectful of its navy. He therefore recommended not only the expansion of the U.S. battle fleet, but the careful development of naval bases, canals, and coaling stations overseas, so that the oceans would act as a strategic opportunity for America rather than as a liability in the face of more aggressive competitors. Effective control over vital maritime chokepoints, bases, and ocean lanes would allow the seagoing nations to project their influence inland while constraining the expansion of great land powers such as Russia - but that control would have to be exercised and maintained energetically.

If Mahan was confident that Anglo-American command of the sea could be used to check the consolidation of great land powers in Europe and Asia, Halford Mackinder was much less so. A British parliamentarian and founder of the geographic discipline, Mackinder formulated his core argument only a few years after Mahan's appeared. In a *Geographical Journal* article from 1904, and later in a book entitled *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Mackinder asked his readers to think of Europe, Asia, and North Africa as one great continent, which he called the "world island." This single world island, Mackinder pointed out, contained much greater human and natural resources than the rest of the planet's islands and continents combined. Moreover the world island's "Heartland" - at its maximum extent including Russia, Mongolia, Iran, Tibet, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe - had the great advantage of virtual inaccessibility to sea power. Historically, it was not so unusual for land powers to defeat and overcome sea powers. After all, sea power was ultimately based upon the land. Were the European and Asian continents ever to fall under the domination of a single political entity emanating from the Heartland, that entity would necessarily overpower through sheer weight the outer crescent of insular maritime nations such as the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Japan. In this sense, the most relevant precedent for the future might not be European maritime dominance, but the sprawling Mongol empires of the 13th century.

Mackinder suggested that starting in about 1500 AD, with the launch of what he called the Columbian era, Western European nations had been able to employ specific naval and technological advantages to explore, penetrate, and colonize the rest of the world. The Asian Heartland had thereby been outmaneuvered. But by the start of the twentieth century, that era was coming to an end. The surface of the earth had been largely navigated and partitioned by Europe's great empires; the international system was now closed, without more possibilities for external discovery. Furthermore, railways now crisscrossed massive distances, bringing new advantages to trade, transport, and communication by land. The future tendency would therefore be toward the consolidation of continental-sized land powers in Eurasia, raising the danger of Britain's relative decline and encirclement. The aftermath of the First World War, including the Bolshevik Revolution as well as Germany's failed bid for continental dominance, illustrated Mackinder's argument that the Eurasian landmass could not be allowed to fall under the control of a hostile authoritarian power. His specific response was to call for the creation of an independent tier of East European buffer states, at the Heartland's perimeter, to guard against either German or Soviet expansion. But like Mahan, Mackinder feared that modern liberal democracies were not inclined to think strategically over the long run. Indeed Woodrow Wilson's brainchild, the League of Nations, was an excellent contemporary example of legalistic liberal rather than sound strategic or geopolitical thinking in relation to world politics. Mackinder urged

the West's great maritime democracies to defend themselves by establishing favorable balances of power on land; Wilson, by contrast, created the League with the utopian intention of outmoding balances of power altogether.

The failure of the League of Nations to prevent fascist aggression led to a new wave of Western geopolitical thought, of which Nicolas Spykman was the leading author. A Yale professor of Dutch origin, Spykman built on Mackinder's work and modified it significantly through two fine books written during the early 1940s: *America's Strategy in World Politics*, and *The Geography of the Peace*. In particular, Spykman introduced the concept of the "Rimland," a belt of nations stretching from France and Germany across the Middle East, to India, and finally to China. What distinguished Rimland powers, for Spykman, was their amphibious nature: they were neither purely on land nor sea. But taken together, it was these Rimland powers - and not Mackinder's Heartland, as such - that contained most of the human population and economic productivity on the planet. Spykman therefore characterized the great geopolitical struggles such as the Second World War as contests not of sea power versus land power, but rather as conflicts between mixed alliances - each on sea and land - over control of the Rimland. And since the Rimland contained most of the world's wealth and population, control of the Rimland meant control of the world.

Spykman renamed Mackinder's outer crescent of maritime powers the "Offshore Islands and Continents." A purely naval and/or isolationist approach is always appealing to offshore islanders. Aware of the intense reluctance of many Americans to engage in military conflicts overseas, Spykman nevertheless denied that an isolationist policy was a viable option for the United States, either during or after World War Two. If the U.S. did not exercise effective control over the airspace and sea lanes of the two oceans on either side of it, then somebody else would. Specifically, Spykman pointed out the southern cone of South America was so far away from the United States that German influence there was a real possibility if Hitler was permitted to win the war in Europe. U.S. hemispheric defense would then inevitably collapse into something even more impoverished and constrained, allowing the Axis powers to completely dominate vital resources from Europe and Asia. Altogether, the Rimland's combined potential meant there was simply no safe resting place in geographic isolation for Americans on this side of the water. The U.S. would have to ensure, through serious and costly effort, that the resources of the Old World were not combined and mobilized against the New World. Compared to Mackinder, however, Spykman was more optimistic that this could actually be done, not only through the exercise of a forward strategic presence, but because of the development of modern American air power. He further warned, in anticipation of World War Two's conclusion, that from the perspective of the leading Offshore Continent (i.e., America) a Rimland dominated by the Heartland (i.e., Russia) was no improvement on a Heartland dominated by the Rimland (i.e., Nazi Germany and Japan.)

For both Spykman and Mackinder, the geopolitical nightmare for the West was an autocratic Heartland-Rimland conglomeration able to dominate the Old World to such an extent that the seagoing Anglo-American democracies would be outmaneuvered. This dire scenario has often been dismissed over the years as a highly improbable one. But in fact, the great struggles of the twentieth century, including two world wars and one cold one, were fought specifically to prevent that scenario from fully materializing, and without American intervention there is good reason to believe that either an authoritarian Germany or the Soviet Union would have made the nightmare a lasting reality.

The other way in which Mackinder's 1919 book, especially, appears to have been prophetic, was in its prediction of a long-term power shift from West to East, reversing the trend of previous centuries. During most of the modern era, Europe was at the center of international politics, with the world's most capable militaries, its most dynamic economies, and its most assertive foreign policies. Even during the Cold War, when Rimland nations in Western Europe were finally overshadowed by the actions of external superpowers, the European continent - particularly Germany - remained the supreme geopolitical prize for which those superpowers contested. The end of the Cold War was taken gratefully by much of liberal opinion to mean the end of geopolitics. But in reality, it introduced a new distribution and ranking of great powers, characterized by a predominant America, a resentful Russia, a strategically incoherent European Union, and a rising set of Asian nations. As economies like China's have grown very quickly, allowing them to build up and modernize their armed forces, there has been a massive shift in relative economic and military capabilities from the Atlantic toward the Pacific. The chief focus of international great power competition is now clearly along the eastern, rather than the western end, of Spykman's Rimland. And the single most dramatic development within that zone has been the rise of Chinese power - economically, diplomatically, and militarily.

In geopolitical terms, China is not a Heartland but a Rimland power. That is to say, it is accessible by sea and land, with security concerns in both directions. The collapse of the Soviet Union represented a windfall for China, reducing the threat from the north. Starting in the 1990s, Beijing also resolved many of its border disputes with neighboring countries on land. This has sometimes been taken as an indication that China has few aggressive intentions. But in fact the resolution and security of China's vast land frontier - an exceptional achievement, by historical standards - allows Beijing to be more assertive and expansionist at sea. And it has been. In recent years, aware of American preoccupations with economic recession and counterterrorism, China has begun throwing its weight around in the South and East China Seas quite aggressively, triggering a series of dangerous maritime incidents as it presses up against Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam, as well as U.S. surveillance ships. At the same time, China has built up and modernized its navy, both to lend greater weight to its diplomatic assertions in the region, and to protect its extensive and growing merchant marine. In fact numerous Chinese naval strategists reference Admiral Mahan and his concepts of sea command, explicitly. The practical Chinese goal appears to be effective mainland command over the South China Sea. Admittedly, China's navy - or People's Liberation Army Navy, as it is called - is still not comparable to the U.S. Navy in overall quality or scope, but then again it doesn't have to be. By building up large numbers of land-based missiles, frigates, and submarines, ready to attack U.S. forces in unorthodox fashion - for example in concert with cyber strikes - China has created a new correlation of forces in nearby waters which an American president might well be reluctant to challenge during a crisis situation. The purpose of the Chinese naval buildup is not to go looking for war with the United States, but precisely to coerce and deter the U.S. from acting in the region, notably in the defense of Taiwan. Securing control of Taiwan would constitute not only a sweeping national accomplishment for the Chinese Communist Party, but a dramatic improvement in China's geopolitical situation at sea. What Chinese strategists call the "first island chain," stretching from Japan to Malaysia, would then be breached. Beyond that, the Chinese themselves may not know how they plan to use their newfound sea power. But the history of such matters suggests that they will continue to define their maritime interests more expansively, as they acquire greater and greater maritime capabilities.

All told, China is increasingly in a position to challenge the U.S. for predominance along the East Asian littoral, and has considerable interest in doing so, especially given its grinding sense of historical grievance. Indeed for the Chinese such a challenge would only be a return to the natural order of things, whereby the Middle Kingdom leads within East Asia. The Russians, for their part, share with China a long-term desire to expel American influence from their immediate spheres of influence. The most persuasive accounts of Sino-Russian cooperation tend to suggest that this cooperation is opportunistic and pragmatic. Still, from an American point of view, this is not exactly reassuring. If these two massive and authoritarian powers are able to cooperate pragmatically and case by case against American interests, the U.S. will face a severe geopolitical challenge in much of Eurasia. When Rimland powers are able to secure their borders by land, as China seems to be doing, and then take to the seas convincingly, this is exactly what should worry offshore powers such as the United States.

President Obama came into office hoping for cooperation with China on a range of issues such as climate change and arms control; the conduct of a sustained Sino-American strategic competition was probably the last thing on his mind. He soon discovered that praising China's growing power, as he did upon visiting Beijing in 2009, only encouraged its more confident self-assertion. As America's Asian allies grew increasingly concerned by Chinese aggressiveness at sea, the Obama administration eventually announced a strategic "pivot" toward Asia. But the pivot has been under-resourced. Even as the administration claims to be pivoting to East Asia, it has cut U.S. naval capabilities significantly - capabilities that must obviously be central in any American effort to balance Chinese influence. Indeed Obama went so far during a 2012 presidential election debate as to mock concerns over America's shrinking Navy. In strategic terms, under this administration, the U.S. response to a rising China has simply not been adequate.

It is neither unusual nor necessarily irrational for great powers to engage in long-term geopolitical competition during peacetime. But a crucial first step, conceptually, is to realize that this is exactly the situation we are now in with regard to China. Competitive strategies do not rule out the possibility of cooperation in certain areas, such as trade, but they do seek to leverage our strengths against a competitor's weaknesses over a lengthy period of time.

One of the explanations for the lack of any truly competitive U.S. strategy toward China today is the tacit and widespread assumption that American power is in relative and irreversible decline, while China's rise to predominance is more or less ordained. But popular arguments regarding America's decline are overstated these

days, just as they have been before. The United States still holds a range of capabilities and advantages that no other power - including China - possesses. These advantages include the world's largest single economy, its most capable armed forces by far, its leading universities, a persistent edge in technological innovation, an unusual attractiveness for immigrants, vast natural resources on a continental scale, deep financial markets, underlying political stability, a tremendous capacity for resilience, and a set of international alliances that center on the U.S. rather than on any other country. China does pose a serious geopolitical challenge, and it may be expanding quickly, but Beijing does not hold most of these advantages, and Chinese leaders know it. The United States has immense capacities to develop and implement seriously competitive foreign policy strategies, if and when it chooses to do so. Since the capabilities exist, this is mainly a question of political choice and will. Americans still have the ability to choose whether or not they want to play a leading role in the world. If they choose to abdicate that role, there is very little reason to think their most likely international successors will be friendlier to democratic values or to U.S. interests.

A central insight of Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman alike is that without robust balances of power in the Old World, the liberties of the New World cannot be maintained. It has often been characteristic of liberal opinion in Anglo-American countries to assume either that such balances are self-executing, or that they are no longer necessary, given advances in multilateral interdependence. But this periodic and blasé lack of interest in long-term security threats is itself possible only because of the basic geopolitical condition undergirding American liberal democracy, namely, a physical separation from typical dangers by two great oceans. If the balance of great powers within Eurasia is not monitored and preserved with genuine vigilance from the outside, this will eventually have concrete implications for U.S. prosperity and security - perhaps sooner rather than later. In other words, you may not be interested in geopolitics, but geopolitics is interested in you; American freedoms, in the long run, quite literally rest upon a fragmentation of power in the Old World. This country's founders understood as much, and recognized it in their words and actions as they navigated the treacherous waters of international power politics with both the wisdom of serpents and the innocence of doves. Geopolitical thinking can provide some of the necessary wisdom of serpents, as Americans continue to navigate those treacherous waters today.

---

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).