

# Eurasia, the “World Island”: Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century

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“A victorious Roman general, when he entered the city, amid all the head-turning splendor of a ‘Triumph,’ had behind him on the chariot a slave who whispered into his ear that he was mortal. When our statesmen are in conversation with the defeated enemy, some airy cherub should whisper to them from time to time this saying: Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World.” –Sir Halford Mackinder, 1919[1]

“Few modern ideologies are as whimsically all-encompassing, as romantically obscure, as intellectually sloppy, and as likely to start a third world war as the theory of ‘geopolitics.’” –Charles Clover, 1999[2]

The world today hardly resembles the one that Sir Halford Mackinder examined in 1904, when he first wrote about the advantages of central positioning on the Eurasian landmass. His theories would have influence throughout the century, informing and shaping US containment policy throughout the Cold War. Today, almost a century after his “Heartland” theory came into being, there is renewed interest in the region that Mackinder considered the key to world dominance. The Heartland of the Eurasian landmass may well play an important role in the next century, and the policy of today’s lone superpower toward that region will have a tremendous influence upon the character of the entire international system.

Eurasia, the “World Island” to Mackinder, is still central to American foreign policy and will likely to continue to be so for some time. Conventional wisdom holds that only a power dominating the resources of Eurasia would have the potential to threaten the interests of the United States. Yet that conventional wisdom, as well as many of the other assumptions that traditionally inform our policy, has not been subjected to enough scrutiny in light of the changed international realities. Many geopolitical “truths” that have passed into the canon of security intellectuals rarely get a proper reexamination to determine their relevance to the constantly evolving nature of the system. Were the world system static, no further theorizing would be necessary. Since it is not, we must constantly reevaluate our fundamental assumptions to see whether or not any “eternal” rules of the game, geopolitical and otherwise, truly exist.

Geopolitics is traditionally defined as the study of “the influence of geographical factors on political action,”[3] but this oft-cited definition fails to capture the many meanings that have

evolved for the term over the years. Dr. Gearoid Ó Tuathail, an Irish geographer and associate professor at Virginia Tech, has identified three main uses of “geopolitics” since the end of World War II. First, it is sometimes used to describe a survey of a particular region or problem, to “read the manifest features of that which was held to be ‘external reality.’”[4] Geopolitics, according to this usage, is a lens through which to survey a problem: “The Geopolitics of X, where X is oil, energy, resources, information, the Middle East, Central America, Europe, etc.” Second, geopolitics can be synonymous with *realpolitik*, which according to Ó Tuathail is “almost exclusively the legacy of Henry Kissinger.”[5] Kissinger used the term to describe his attempts to maintain a “favorable equilibrium” in world politics, and his singular ability to see the proper course and set sail for it. His Machiavellian approach was infamously devoid of ideology (or “sentimentality”), and as such caused the term geopolitics to fall out of favor with many of the foreign policy practitioners who followed. Last, and most important for our purposes, geopolitics has become synonymous with grand strategy, “not, as in Kissinger, about the everyday tactical conduct of statecraft.”[6] Theorists like Colin Gray place geography in the center of international relations and attempt to decipher the fundamental, eternal factors that drive state action. This belief traces its roots directly back to Sir Halford Mackinder and his theories of the Heartland.

### **A Brief History of Geopolitics in Theory and Policy**

To the early 20th-century British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder, world history was a story of constant conflict between land and sea powers. In the past, during what he described as the Columbian Epoch, increased mobility that the sea provided put naval powers at a distinct advantage over their territorial adversaries. The classic example of this advantage was the Crimean War, in which Russia could not project power to the south as effectively as the sea-supplied French and British, despite the fact that the battlefields were far closer to Moscow than to London. But the Columbian Epoch was coming to a conclusion at the turn of the 20th century when Mackinder was first writing, as evolving technology, especially the system of railroads, allowed land powers to be nearly as mobile as those of the sea. Because land powers on the World Island had a smaller distance to travel than the sea powers operating on its periphery, any increase in their mobility would tip the balance of power in their favor. These “interior lines” gave the power with the “central position” on the World Island the ability to project power anywhere more rapidly than the sea powers could defend. Thus, who ruled the Heartland would have the possibility of commanding the entire World Island.

Mackinder believed that the world had evolved into what he called a “closed system.” There was no more room for expansion by the end of the 19th century, for colonialism had brought the entire world under the sway of Europe. Power politics of the future, Mackinder speculated, would be marked by a competition over the old territories rather than a quest for new ones. His Heartland concept recalled the 18th-century strategists’ notion of the “key position” on the battlefield,[7] the recognition of which was crucial to victory. Traditional military strategists thought that control of the key position on the map was crucial to winning the war, and since Mackinder recognized that the round world was now one big battlefield, identification and control of the key position would lead to global supremacy.

Mackinder’s theories might have faded into irrelevance were it not for their apparent influence on the foreign policy of Nazi Germany. A German geopolitician and devotee of Mackinder, Karl Haushofer, spent the interwar period writing extensively about the Heartland and the need for *Lebensraum* (additional territory deemed essential for continued

national well-being) for the German people. One of Haushofer's pupils was Rudolph Hess, who brought his teacher into the inner intellectual circles of the Reich. Haushofer was appointed by Hitler to run the German Academy in Berlin, which was "more a propagandic institution than a true academy in the continental European sense,"[8] according to one observer. The actual effect of his teachings upon German policy is open to debate-Haushofer may have had an enormous effect on Hitler through his pupil,[9] or he may have been "a neglected and slighted man who would certainly enjoy learning about the hullabaloo raised by his doctrine" in the United States.[10] It cannot be proven that the *Drang nach Osten* (eastward push) was affected by a desire to control the Heartland. Here policy may just overlap with, rather than be dictated by, geotheory. But the possibility that there was a secret master plan at work in Berlin created a whole new interest in geopolitics and what Mackinder and geopolitics had to say.

Haushofer's ideas probably had a larger influence upon American strategic studies during the war than they did on German policy. Wartime paranoia fed an image of a secret German science of *geopolitik* that was driving Nazi action, bringing Mackinder and Haushofer onto the American intellectual radar screen. In 1942 *Life* magazine ran an article titled "Geopolitics: The Lurid Career of a Scientific System which a Briton Invented, the Germans Used, and the Americans Need to Study,"[11] which captured the mood of the period, imagining a cabal of foreign policy "scientists" dictating policy for the dictator. Opinions differed between those who prescribed rapid acceptance of *geopolitik* and those who dismissed it as pseudoscience. The latter opinion was strengthened, of course, by Germany's eventual defeat.

#### *From Hot War to Cold*

The most influential American geopolitician to emerge out of the furor created by Haushofer and the quest for *Lebensraum* was Yale University professor Nicholas Spykman. Spykman, considered one of the leading intellectual forefathers of containment, speculated about power projection into and out of the Heartland. Whereas Mackinder assumed that geographical formations made for easiest access from the east, Spykman argued that the littoral areas of the Heartland, or what he called the "Rimland," was key to controlling the center. He updated Mackinder, positing, "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." [12] Spykman put an American twist on geopolitical theory, and laid the intellectual foundation for Kennan and those who argued that the Western powers ought to strengthen the Rimland to contain the Soviet Union, lest it use its control of the Heartland to command the World Island.[13]

Geopolitics as grand strategy was one of the important intellectual foundations for the West's Cold War containment policy. Canadian geographer Simon Dalby recognizes it as one of the "four security discourses (the others being sovietology, strategy, and the realist approach to international relations) which American 'security intellectuals' have drawn on in constructing the 'Soviet threat.'" [14] According to one of the preeminent historians of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis, in the late 1940s "there developed a line of reasoning reminiscent of Sir Halford Mackinder's geopolitics, with its assumption that none of the world's 'rimlands' could be secure if the Eurasian 'heartland' was under the domination of a single hostile power." [15] Gaddis describes how the containment policy evolved from countering Soviet expansion at every point in the rimlands to concentration of defense on a few key points, especially Western Europe and Japan.

While Mackinder's warnings of the advantages inherent in central positioning on the

Eurasian landmass certainly became incorporated into Cold War American strategic thought and policy, some observers seem to believe that the principle architects of US foreign policy throughout the Cold War era must have been carrying Mackinder in their briefcases. Colin Gray wrote:

By far the most influential geopolitical concept for Anglo-American statecraft has been the idea of a Eurasian ‘heartland,’ and then the complementary idea-as-policy of containing the heartland power of the day within, not to, Eurasia. From Harry S Truman to George Bush, the overarching vision of US national security was explicitly geopolitical and directly traceable to the heartland theory of Mackinder. . . . Mackinder’s relevance to the containment of a heartland-occupying Soviet Union in the cold war was so apparent as to approach the status of a cliché.[16]

Indeed, many policymakers came from the world of academia, where they were certainly exposed to Mackinder’s geopolitical theories. As was described above, Henry Kissinger used the term geopolitics to denote any policy dependent upon power principles at the expense of ideology and “sentimentality.” Kissinger’s worldview was less dependent upon geographical realities than some of the other Cold Warriors, especially Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was President Carter’s National Security Advisor and a graduate-school mentor of Madeleine Albright. Brzezinski has made Eurasia the focus for US foreign policy in all of his writing, consistently warning of the dangerous advantages that the Heartland power had over the West.[17]

It is of course very difficult to trace the progression of ideas into policy. But theories and assumptions, whether articulated or not, provide the frameworks which guide decisionmaking. Without those frameworks, the proper course for the nation, or the national interest itself, cannot be identified or pursued. So while it is possible that geopolitics and containment simply coincided, it is highly unlikely that Western policymakers could look at a map of the world, see the red zone in the Heartland, and not remember the warning from Mackinder’s cherub.[18]

### *After the Cold War*

One might expect that geopolitics would have faded into the intellectual background with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of the Heartland power. Strangely, though, Mackinder received a fresh look by some scholars in the 1990s, both in the United States and abroad, and especially in the Heartland itself.[19] In a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Charles Clover identified the growing discussion of geopolitics among some circles in Russia today:

Many Russian intellectuals, who once thought their homeland’s victory over the world would be the inevitable result of history, now pin their hope for Russia’s return to greatness on a theory that is, in a way, the opposite of dialectical materialism. Victory is now to be found in geography, rather than history; in space, rather than time. . . . The movement envisions the Eurasian heartland as the geographic launching pad for a global anti-Western movement whose goal is the ultimate expulsion of “Atlantic” (read: “American”) influence from Eurasia.[20]

Clover argues that the modern Russian *geopolitik* is being used as the glue to form bonds

between the ultra-left and ultra-right, hinting at a “red-brown” coalition that could become dominant in Russian politics in the years ahead, with ominous implications for international stability.

This eventuality would of course be quite problematic for an America that still views Eurasia as the chessboard upon which the game of global control will be played. The World Island is still the central focus of US policy, and the Russians are still considered to have the most fortunate position on the map. Yet is there now, or was there ever, any reason to believe that the Heartland of Eurasia bestows any sort of geopolitical advantage to the power that controls it?

## Examining Mackinder

Mackinder’s theories have been attacked from many directions over the years, but their remnants persist in our intellectual memory. Mackinder (and the geopoliticians who have followed) thought that geography favored the Heartland power for five key reasons: the Heartland was virtually *impenetrable* to foreign invasion; technological changes offered increased *mobility* which favored land powers; the Heartland was in the *central position* on the World Island, giving it shorter, interior lines of transportation and communication than a power defending the Rimland; the Heartland was loaded with natural resources waiting to be exploited that could give the area the highest *productivity* on earth; and, last, the Eurasian World Island, being the home to the majority of the world’s land, people, and resources, was the springboard for global hegemony. Every one of these assumptions collapses under even the most cursory scrutiny.

### *Impregnability*

“The Heartland is the greatest natural fortress on earth,” Mackinder wrote. He envisioned it being guarded by natural geographical formations that make it almost impregnable to attack, specifically the “ice-clad Polar Sea, forested and rugged Lenaland [Siberia east of the Yenisei River], and the Central Asiatic mountain and arid tableland.”[21] The fortress had one weakness, Mackinder concluded: there was an opening in the west, between the Baltic and Black Seas, which was not blocked geographically. This gap in the natural defenses led to the famous conclusion that whoever ruled Eastern Europe would be in an advantageous position to rule the Heartland, and therefore the World Island, and therefore the world.

Mackinder seemed to ignore the fact that to the extent these geographical formations protected a Heartland power, they also prevented it from projecting outward. Walls tend to keep residents in as effectively as they keep invaders out. The geographical boundaries of the Heartland, to the extent that they were ever obstacles, would have hampered any attempt to use it as a springboard for hemispheric dominance.

But more important, the Heartland can be considered a fortress only by standards of 19th-century technology. A modern army, should it want to attack the Heartland, would have little trouble bypassing “Lenaland,” or slicing right through Central Asia. Even its most seemingly impenetrable boundary, the Polar Sea, offers little protection from attack from the sky by planes and missiles. The greatest natural fortress on earth is certainly vulnerable to 21st-century weaponry, offering little inherent advantage to the power within.<J243>

The essential irrelevance of the “natural defenses” of the Heartland was pointed out during the first stages of debate on Mackinder during World War II. In debunking geopolitics as a



“pseudoscience,” Ralph Turner made the seemingly obvious point in 1943 that “the high mobility of land power on the steppes . . . is now amplified or offset by the far greater mobility of air power.”[22] Yet many geopoliticians remain unconvinced. Colin Gray, perhaps the leading geopolitician of our time, has responded to this argument by saying, “That technology has canceled geography contains just enough merit to be called a plausible fallacy.”[23] He then argues from a tactical standpoint, pointing out that logistical factors make geography’s influence permanent. Surely he is correct when he points out that “it mattered enormously” that the Falklands were islands and Kuwait a desert, and geography still has a great impact upon military tactics and how battles are fought. But it has a decreasing impact upon determinations of when states choose to fight or who prevails. Gray does not make the case for the permanence of geographical factors upon *grand strategy*. The experiences in the disparate conditions of the Falklands and Kuwait show that technology can indeed overcome the geographical boundaries of any natural fortress, including those of the Heartland.

Perhaps the projection of power out of the Heartland was not crucial to Mackinder’s concept. Perhaps the important point was that geographical defenses would allow the Heartland power to exploit its resources and consolidate its power, uninterrupted by conquest and devastation. But even by this conception, the Heartland falls far short. Russia has been devastated time and again throughout history. Mongols, Turks, Arabs, Persians, Swedes, French, Germans, and many other groups have penetrated the walls of the fortress, repeatedly laying waste to the area and inhibiting long-term, steady growth. The Heartland was not impenetrable to the technologies of the last two millennia, much less those of the next.

### *Mobility*

To Mackinder, the Heartland power had a distinct geopolitical advantage at the end of the Columbian Epoch because changes in technology allowed for rapid troop movement and power projection. The railroad put land powers on equal footing with those of the sea, and the vast flat steppes put the Heartland in the best position to exploit that new technology and mobility, especially since the Heartland afforded shorter, interior lines of movement.

But, as was discussed above, technological advancement did not stop with the railroad. The mobility that air power brings changes all the calculations of Mackinder. There is no longer an advantage to being able to choose the point of attack, for armed forces can be airlifted between any two points on the globe in a matter of hours. Rail mobility offered a tremendous advantage before the advent of air travel, but not nearly so much since.

Gray and others argue that planes have to land, and therefore geographical positioning is still vital. But this too is rapidly becoming obsolete. Mackinder clearly did not anticipate, and Gray does not take into account, the implications of bombers that can take off from Missouri, drop their bombload on Kosovo, and land back in Missouri. In our rapidly shrinking world, where air power can now be projected around the world from any position, the geographical location of bases (and indeed geography itself) is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

### *Central Position*

Mackinder would have us believe that central positioning is an advantage to a Heartland power, for it allows shorter, internal lines of transportation with which the Heartland power

can choose the point of attack. To Cold War strategists, this central positioning made containment a nightmare, for it necessitated defense of the enormous littoral rimlands.

Mackinder might have been the first strategist in history to suggest that *the surrounded* have the advantage. When has central positioning ever been advantageous to any nation? No one spoke of the “interior lines of communication” of the Third Reich, for instance. Germany has always been at a disadvantage because of her position in the heart of Europe. Similarly, the central positioning of the Heartland of Eurasia has never been geopolitically advantageous to its inhabitants. Rather than providing a springboard to attack in any direction, central positioning has rendered the Heartland power vulnerable on all sides. Rather than providing a heightened security, this position actually heightens the Heartland’s insecurity. Indeed, Russian history is filled with attacks from the east, west, and south, feeding an insecurity and a paranoia to which Americans, historically protected by vast oceans, cannot relate.

Central positioning is an advantage only to a Heartland power bent of expansion. *Realpolitik* and *geopolitik* informed the West that while their intentions in the Rimland were benign (or at least not offensive in nature), the Soviets had imperial designs on every region of the world. To the West, the Soviets were not *threatened from* all directions, but rather were *threatening to* all directions. This assumption of the eternality of Russian imperialism continues to affect our policy today, and we continue to see the Russian littoral as threatened by its vast neighbor.

The inability to understand the other’s view is one of the great historical features of US foreign policy. We still are not able to understand that the quest for empire in Russian history is at least in part an attempt to bolster the insecurity that its position has always entailed. Russia’s imperial outposts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and elsewhere provided buffer zones against the attacks that have periodically devastated Russian land. Central positioning has led to a state of permanent insecurity, which has poisoned Russia’s relations with its neighbors. The West clumsily heightens that sense of insecurity with every new foray into the Rimlands.

### *Productivity*

Ironically, the real reason behind the ability of the Heartland to resist attack also guarantees that it will never be able to live up to Mackinder’s forecast. In order to dominate the World Island, a Heartland power would have to exploit its vast resources. But since virtually all of the pivot area lies latitudinally above the continental United States, the harsh climate makes mining difficult, growing seasons brief, and successful attack nearly impossible.

Large sections of the Heartland are not and will never be productive. So it is hard to imagine that the productivity of the region will ever match Sir Halford’s key condition for dominance of the World Island.

### *“Who rules the World Island commands the World”*

Using Mackinder’s own qualifications, it appears that he has placed the key geographical position in the wrong part of the world. It does not appear true that the Eastern Hemisphere bestows any strategic advantage over the Western. In fact, control over the Western Hemisphere has allowed the United States to rise to an unprecedented position of power, for many of the very reasons Mackinder identified with the Heartland. The oceans provide it

with heretofore virtually impregnable boundaries, and it has command over a collection of resources far greater than any Eurasian power could effectively exploit, given climatic realities. It seems hard to argue that geographical factors favor Mackinder's Heartland over the American, or to see why so many strategists continue to put Eurasia as the center of the world. Heterogeneity alone seems to predestine the Eastern Hemisphere to infighting, and to disadvantages when compared to the Western.

The point here is not to reinvent the Heartland, however, or to argue that "who rules North America commands the world." Rather it is to show that even by the terms he used, Mackinder's Heartland never was capable of bestowing any extraordinary advantages upon its inhabitants. If anything, it was and is a disadvantage, especially when compared to other, more manageable, geographical positions.

### **Implications for Policy and Theory**

One of the reasons that Mackinder is being resurrected yet again is because policymakers are searching for ways to conceptualize and deal with the heart of his Heartland-Central Asia and the Caspian Sea-which is a region that has the potential to become a major source of great-power contention in the next century. Some analysts estimate that the fossil fuels in the region will transform it into a "new Saudi Arabia" in the coming decades.[24] Its vast deposits made the Soviet Union one of the largest exporters of oil during the last decades of the Cold War, and new reserves have been discovered through intensive exploration since. An apparent power vacuum within the region is once again the subject of rivalry from without, and a new "great game" (an analogy to which we will return) seems to be unfolding, with Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and the United States as the players. Desire for fossil fuels and the wealth they create has the potential to damage relations between the global and regional powers, if diplomacy is mishandled.

Russian behavior toward the states of Central Asia, and indeed toward all the other former Soviet nations, is often seen to be a bellwether of its new nature. Some observers assume that Russian meddling in the affairs of the states on its periphery is an inevitable sign of neoimperialism, which is a permanent characteristic of its eternal national character. To head off any return to empire, many feel that the West must be firm in discouraging a growth in Russian influence in the new states. Thus the United States is interested in projecting power into Central Asia in the belief that filling power vacuums is necessary to prevent the Russians from doing so, and to keep the Cold War from recurring. Russia and China today are regional powers that seek influence only in their littoral; the United States projects power everywhere. The three overlap in Central Asia, which is the only region where the Cold War tradition of "triangular diplomacy" may well become a reality again if geopolitical concerns dominate our strategy.

The heart of the Heartland is floating on top of a sea of oil. Before we decide on the nature of our policy toward the region, we must examine some of the assumptions that we bring into the debate. The theories of Mackinder and the geopoliticians still linger, affecting the ways that our policy is made, despite the fact that the foundations upon which those theories are built are intellectually shaky at best.

### *Geopolitics and Eternal Realities*

Geopoliticians, by all uses of that term, seem to claim to understand the eternal and fundamental geographical realities in a way that automatically places their analyses above



those of ordinary strategists. Mackinder, Kissinger, Brzezinski, Gray, and the rest all would have us believe that they can see the proper course for policy because they understand the “eternal” realities that the earth provides, despite the fact that their assumptions are often baseless or archaic. Ó Tuathail has described this phenomenon, and his remarks are worth quoting at some length:

To understand the appeal of formal geopolitics to certain intellectuals, institutions, and would-be strategists, one has to appreciate the mythic qualities of geopolitics. Geopolitics is mythic because it promises uncanny clarity and insight in a complex world. It actively closes down an openness to the geographical diversity of the world and represses questioning and difference. The plurality of the world is reduced to certain “transcendent truths” about strategy. Geopolitics is a narrow instrumental form of reason that is also a form of faith, a belief that there is a secret substratum and/or a permanent set of conflicts and interests that accounts for the course of world politics. It is fetishistically concerned with “insight,” and “prophecy.” Formal geopolitics appeals to those who yearn for the apparent certitude of “timeless truths.” Historically, it is produced by and appeals to right-wing countermoderns because it imposes a constructed certitude upon the unruly complexity of world politics, uncovering transcendent struggles between seemingly permanent opposites (“landpower” versus “seapower,” “oceanic” versus “continental,” “East” versus “West”) and folding geographical difference into depluralized geopolitical categories like “heartland,” “rimland,” “shatterbelt,” and the like. Foreign policy complexity becomes simple(minded) strategic gaming. [Ó Tuathail makes reference to Brzezinski here] Such formal geopolitical reasoning is . . . a flawed foundation upon which to construct a foreign policy that needs to be sensitive to the particularity and diversity of the world’s states, and to global processes and challenges that transcend state-centric reasoning.[25]

As unsettling as it may be, there are no “timeless truths” in world politics. The international system changes as fast as we can understand its functions, and often much faster. It seems to be natural for the human mind to use analogies and slogans to comprehend situations that are difficult to grasp. If policymakers indeed simplify the world into frameworks to make it comprehensible, then they must beware not to base those frameworks on outdated and intellectually sloppy assumptions of geopolitics.

### *Analogies and Policy*

Policy is driven by analogy, both historical and theoretical. One common, and dangerous, analogy that drives US Eurasian policy is “the game.” Brzezinski speaks of chess; Central Asian policy is the “new great game”; Kissinger and Nixon used game analogies throughout their reign and in their writings afterward.[26] Impenetrably complex problems are simplified to games, which was problematic enough during the Cold War but is acutely poisonous today.

Take Brzezinski’s chess analogy. Chess has two players, and one opponent; it is zero-sum, and to the finish; there is a winner and a loser, with no middle ground. The opponent of the United States to Brzezinski is, and has always been, Russia. If we approach Eurasia as if it were a chessboard, then we will be met by *opponents*, and cooperation and mutual benefit would be removed from our calculations. If the leaders of the most powerful nation on earth were to conceptualize foreign policy as a chess game, it would virtually ensure that other nations would as well. A Eurasian alliance to counteract growing US influence would be

virtually inevitable.

Mackinder's Heartland theory is another example of inappropriately applied analogy. Sir Halford took Britain's traditional fear of the dominance of the resources of continental Europe by one power and extended it to encompass the entire world. To many geopoliticians, the United States is an island power, peripheral to the crucial and decisive land of Eurasia. The only way America can be safe is if the continent does not unify against her.

England's fear of a united European continent in the 19th century was understandable, because only a continental power unconcerned with land enemies would be able to concentrate its resources to challenge the Royal Navy. The analogy with the World Island and the United States falls apart, for no nation that dominates that continent would ever be able to threaten our hemisphere. Even if it were conceivable that one power could dominate Eurasia (which of course it is not), such an imbalance would not necessarily threaten American interests, and the dominant power presumably would not be able to project power over the oceans. Any imaginable alliance of Eurasian powers would be too unwieldy and disparate to operate effectively. Some fear that a Eurasian alliance would be capable of shutting off trade with the United States, ruining our economy and standard of living. While this may have had some relevance when there was the potential for the rest of the world to be dominated by the communists, as long as the great powers of the World Island continue to be wedded to the free market (and do not perceive US power to be threatening), then there is little danger of their voluntarily shutting their doors to the American market and investment structure.

Paradoxically, our attempts to prevent a Eurasian anti-American alliance may make that outcome more likely. As Steven Walt has persuasively shown, imbalances of threat, not imbalances of power, drive alliances together.[27] Our attempts to project power into the Heartland, if done clumsily, can heighten threat perceptions in its capitals, making such counterproductive alliances more attractive.

British uneasiness with the European Union is reflective of this fear of continental alliances. But is there really any threat of a state marshaling forces against the British Isles? Analogies, and their accompanying "eternal interests," tend to persist long after their useful life is over. Sometimes we fail to perceive the end of that intellectual shelf life.

### *Frameworks for Grand Strategies*

The Clinton Administration has been criticized from the beginning for running a foreign policy that is at best reactive and at worst rudderless and confused. While this characterization may not be entirely accurate or even fair, it is apparent that running a foreign policy without the framework provided by a global rival can appear to be unfocused and ad hoc. Without a vision of what the next century ought to look like, no policies can be formulated to bring it about.

During the Cold War, foreign policy decisions were never easy, but at least the Soviet Union provided an enemy to be opposed. Conventional wisdom recommended countering every Soviet move, no matter how trivial. Today the United States is at a unipolar position in every possible sense—militarily, economically, culturally, politically, and on and on. The world looked to the United States at the end of the Cold War to lead a new century, to redefine the rules by which the system operates. As Fareed Zakaria has noted, after the last two world

wars, “America wanted to change the world, and the world was reluctant. But in 1999, the world is eager to change—along the lines being defined by America—but now America is reluctant.”[28]

American policymakers have continuously underestimated the impact that a hegemon can have on the “rules of the game” because they are wedded to the archaic realist and geopolitical notion that those rules do not change. Yet as disconcerting as it may seem, the rules evolve as quickly as “the game” itself, and policymakers must have the vision to anticipate that evolution and adjust accordingly. The end of the Cold War has provided the United States an unprecedented opportunity to shape the nature of the system. In order to do so it is necessary to jettison antiquated and baseless concepts like geopolitics once and for all.

## **Conclusion**

“Eternal” geopolitical realities and national interests are mirages. The idea that a Heartland power has any advantages due to its position on the map cannot be historically or theoretically justified; the notion that an imbalance of power in Eurasia (even if it were conceivable) would somehow threaten the interests of the United States is not tenable; and the idea that geographic “realities” of power can operate outside of the context of ideology, nationalism, and culture is pure fantasy. Worse than mirages, these ideas can cripple the way we run our foreign policy in the new century.

Debunking the fundamental assumptions of geopolitics is an important task when one considers how policy is made. Policymakers operate with a set of assumptions and frameworks through which they interpret international events. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have persuasively argued, historical (and often wildly inappropriate) analogies, banal slogans, and outdated theories often become the driving forces in policymaking.[29] One of these outdated theories that persists in our intellectual memory is Sir Halford Mackinder’s geopolitics.

Policymakers in the United States vastly underestimate the hegemon’s potential to shape the nature of the international system. Intellectuals wedded to old ideas about the unchanging nature of power have so far failed to lead the world in the new directions that it expected. The unparalleled unipolar position that the United States found itself in when the Cold War abruptly ended is being wasted by politicians with no vision for shaping the future. The debate that occasionally resurfaces over the “isolationist” nature of the United States misses a key dimension: if nothing else, America has certainly been intellectually isolationist in the post-Cold War era, hiding behind walls and refusing to lead the world in new directions that its unprecedented power has made possible. The rules that govern international relations evolve. No so-called permanent interests, or eternal geographical realities, exist. The only way that the next century can be better than the one we are leaving is with a reevaluation of the assumptions and attitudes that underlie our actions. A prolonged investigation into the utility of all geopolitical theory would be a good place to start.

## **NOTES**

1. Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962 [original publication 1919]), p 150.

2. Charles Clover, "Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland," *Foreign Affairs*, 78 (March/April 1999), 9.
3. From Jean Gottman, "The Background of Geopolitics," *Military Affairs*, 6 (Winter 1942), 197.
4. Gearoid Ó Tuathail, "Problematizing Geopolitics: Survey, Statesmanship and Strategy," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 19 (1994), 261.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
7. For more on this, see Alfred Vagts, "Geography in War and Geopolitics," *Military Affairs*, 7 (Summer 1943), 85-86.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
9. For this perspective, and summation of Haushofer's writings, see Hans W. Weigert, *Generals and Geopolitics* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942).
10. Vagts, p. 87.
11. J. Thorndike, "Geopolitics: The Lurid Career of a Scientific System which a Briton Invented, the Germans Used, and the Americans Need to Study," *Life*, 21 December 1942.
12. Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of Peace* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1944), p. 43.
13. For more on Spykman, and his links to Mackinder and Kennan, see Michael P. Gerace, "Between Mackinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, Containment, and After," *Comparative Strategy*, 10 (October-December 1991), 347-64.
14. Simon Dalby, "American Security Discourse: the Persistence of Geopolitics," *Political Geography Quarterly*, 9 (April 1990), 171.
15. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 57.
16. Colin S. Gray, "The Continued Primacy of Geography," *Orbis*, 40 (Spring 1996), 258.
17. See, for instance, Brzezinski's Cold War writings like *Game Plan: A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest* (Boston: the Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) and *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) from after it was over.
18. For an analysis of the effect of geopolitics, Mackinder, and the Heartland on US Cold War foreign policy, see G. R. Sloan, *Geopolitics in United States Strategic Policy, 1890-1987* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), esp. pp. 127-239; and Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1988).
19. See, in addition to those works already cited, reviews of the current literature in Colin S. Gray, "Geography and Grand Strategy," *Comparative Strategy*, 10 (October-December 1991) 311-29; David Hansen, "The Immutable Importance of Geography," *Parameters*, 27

(Spring 1997), 55-64; John Hillen and Michael P. Noonan, "The Geopolitics of NATO Enlargement," *Parameters*, 28 (Autumn 1998), 21-34; and Gerald Robbins, "The Post-Soviet Heartland: Reconsidering Mackinder," *Global Affairs*, 8 (Fall 1993), 95-108.

20. Charles Clover, "Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland," *Foreign Affairs*, 78 (March/April 1999), 9.

21. Halford J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, 21 (July 1943), 603.

22. Ralph Turner, "Technology and Geopolitics," *Military Affairs*, 7 (Spring 1943), 14.

23. Colin S. Gray, "The Continued Primacy of Geography," *Orbis*, 40 (Spring 1996), 251.

24. Carl Goldstein, "Final Frontier," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 June 1993, p. 54.

25. Geraoid Ó Tauthail, "Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society," Internet, <http://www.majbill.vt.edu/geog/faculty/toal/papers/stratstud.html>.

26. Ó Tuathail documents Kissinger's usage of the game metaphor in "Problematizing Geopolitics," pp. 266-67.

27. See Steven M. Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987).

28. Quoted in Thomas Freidman, "The War Over Peace," *The New York Times*, 17 October 1999, op-ed.

29. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

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