

THE ISLAND AND THE CONTINENT

A NEO-CLASSICAL APPROACH TO COUNTER-HEGEMONY

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This article proffers an understanding of the rise of American hegemony and of the ongoing counter-hegemonic struggles through the lens of classical geopolitics. Indeed, the discipline of classical geopolitics was defined at the beginning of the “post-Columbian” world in order to understand the geo-historical era that had begun, and to prescribe strategies accordingly. The beginning of the post-Columbian period witnessed the clash between the hegemon Great Britain and the so-called “revisionists” power of Germany, Russia and Japan, as well as the birth of the American hegemony. Further, as the 21st century is a “post-Columbian” world, a neo-classical approach can be useful in understanding the ongoing struggle between the United States’ attempts to protect its hegemony against “revisionist powers” (mostly Russia and China) counter-hegemonic struggles.

I

French geographer Yves Lacoste defines geopolitics as “that situation where two or more political actors are fighting over a territory” and, moreover, as the study of geographical influences on state action¹. The conditioning of the geographical factor can easily be verified with an exemplary case. France was unified before Germany because the French river network developed according to a radial form,

¹ Yves Lacoste, *Che cos'è la geopolitica*, eurasia-rivista.com, 17 July 2007.

with Paris as its epicentre. This enabled a centre of power based in Paris to extend power and organise French space. This unification took place during the modern post-medieval era, as there had been technological developments that made possible the political unification of larger territories, compared to the political entities during the Middle Ages. The unification of Germany by Prussia, on the other hand, did not take place at the same time as the French one because the German river network developed in a parallel form, which hindered political unification. Prussia was able to function as a pivot state and organise the various German micro-political entities around itself only after further technological developments, particularly in the railway sector, which enabled Prussia to overcome its geographical constraints.

Lacoste later enriched his definition by adding an interpretative component, according to which a deep knowledge of one's own geographical space as well as the ways in which a political actor interprets the space it inhabits influences such an actor's action in the world. For example, around the 15th century England and China had a rather similar level of technological development in the naval sphere. However, the English people, as Carl Schmitt wrote, went from being "a people of sheep shepherds" to being a "people of sea foams and corsairs, [of] sons of the sea"², whereas the Chinese people remained a people that, as Friedrich Hegel put it, saw the sea as nothing more than the place where the land finishes³. England became a sea power and built a transoceanic empire, while China remained a continental power, and no revolution occurred within a Chinese image of the space.

This English spatial revolution is described by Schmitt as a transformation that turned England into "an island", a territory that "became the subject and centre of the elementary shift from the mainland to the high sea [...] heir to all the maritime

² Carl Schmitt, *Terra e mare: una considerazione sulla storia del mondo*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1986, p. 54-5.

³ Friedrich Hegel, *Lezioni sulla filosofia della storia*, Mondolibri, 2003

unleashed energies [...] it became an island in a new and hitherto unknown sense”⁴. By doing so, England detached “its gaze from the continent”, and turned it “to the great seas of the world”⁵. This elementary transformation caused, according to Schmitt, the conflict between the Sea (the English island, a sea power), and the Land (the other European states, land powers).

During the Second World War, Johann Von Leers wrote that

throughout the Middle Ages, the British Isles were of little importance to the history of Europe [...] The Normans arrived there in 1090 [while] The Anglo-Saxon had only defended themselves against attacks from the mainland. The Normans, on the other hand, used England as a base to repress mainland powers. They were the first to exploit English insularity, the advantage of being in a land without neighbours and unassailable, as a power policy⁶.

Schmitt and Von Leers’ contemporary, Anton Zischka, makes a similar judgement, stating that “during Roman times and the Middle Ages, England was of no importance”. However, with the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453), “it cut off, so to say, the umbilical cord” that had tied it to Europe; in doing so, “its insular nature was clearly asserted”⁷. Indeed, according to the Zischka, England had managed to conquer naval and commercial “dominance” while weaving alliances with minor European powers (Portugal, Netherlands, and later Poland), in order to weaken and contain larger European states (Spain, France, and later Germany). Zischka does not see these types of alliances as being positive for English allies. In fact, he argues that English wars against European major powers were practically waged on English

⁴ Carl Schmitt, op. cit., p. 17.

⁵ Ibid, p. 99.

⁶ Johann von Leers, *L’Inghilterra: il nemico del continente europeo*, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, 2004, p. 41-2.

⁷ Antonio Zischka, *Le alleanze dell’Inghilterra. Sei secoli di guerre inglesi combattute con le armi altrui*, Mediterranea, Roma, 1941-XIX, p. 41.

allies' territory: a strategy that enabled England to fight its enemy while absorbing its own allies' naval power and commerce. Zischka, for example, claims that the Dutch role as an English "bridgehead" in Europe had "caused such a weakening" of Amsterdam "that its ships were going out to sea in fewer and fewer numbers; Dutch trade and financial power was in sharp decline, while the English one was flourishing"⁸. "Two centuries of 'English friendship' had been enough to turn Amsterdam from an empire into a small and weak country"⁹.

More recently, Tiberio Graziani, on the basis of Von Leers and Zischka's considerations, writes that from a strategic point of view these types of alliances were "stipulated by England as part of an age-old power policy aimed at containing and thwarting friendship and/or integration agreements amongst the nations of the European continent"¹⁰. "British geopolitical doctrine [...] made the exploitation of tensions among continental nations a key element of the balance of power"¹¹. Claudio Mutti, in reconstructing what the English balance of power policy consisted of, argues that it was more of a "putting European nations against each other" in order to "prevent the political unification of the continental space"¹² (Hence, the English choice to support weaker nations against stronger nations), rather than a defence of smaller peoples. Since the power potential of the great continent was superior to that of the British islands, the twofold keystone of the geopolitical doctrine of England was: conquering and maintaining the command of the sea while preventing any type of political unification or organisation of the great continent.

Curiously, similar claims are also posited by the British geographer Halford Mackinder. Mackinder defines the English spatial revolution that occurred in the

⁸ Ivi.

⁹ Ivi, p. 65.

¹⁰ Tiberio Graziani, *Il Patto Atlantico nella geopolitica USA per l'egemonia globale*, in "Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici", Vol. 1/2009, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, 2009.

¹¹ Ivi.

¹² Claudio Mutti, *L'isola e il continente*, in "Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici", Vol. 3/2017, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, p. 9.

15th century as one that marked the beginning of a new geo-historical period: the “Columbian” one. Mackinder argues that for thousands of years England was but a marginal territory within world politics and history. Yet, thanks to the Columbian discoveries and the spatial revolution that occurred within the European mentality, alongside technological developments, England became the centre, rather than the terminal land of the world. In fact, on one side “the North Atlantic is a rounded basin”, enabling England, due to its “central position” in this basin, to “bec[o]me the central, rather than the terminal, land of the world”¹³ after the Columbian discoveries. On the other side, “Britain is an inland group, set in the ocean, but off the shores of the great continent”¹⁴. In order to take advantage of its new central position and become the hegemonic power of the Columbian world, England followed a twofold process of gaining command of the ocean and preventing European unification. By doing so, England built a transoceanic empire, and became the hegemon of the Columbian world.

However, between the 19th and the 20th centuries deep changes occurred in world politics. First, as the world was completely colonised, it became a closed system; second, technological developments such as the railway system made sea transport lose its superiority over land transport; and third, political development, such as man-power organisation, enabled the maintenance of “continental empires”. As a major consequence, “The joint continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa, is now effectively, and not merely theoretically, an island. [...] let us call it the World-Island.”¹⁵ In Mackinder’s view, the World-Island is the greatest geopolitical unity in the world, with also the greatest amount of resources and population. It is made of two different areas: the heartland, which is its landlocked core, and the inner or marginal crescent (Europe, Middle East, North Africa and East Asia). The

¹³ Halford Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas*, William Heinemann, Londra, 1902, pp. 3-4

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 12

¹⁵ Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, National Defense University Press, Washington, p. 45.

remaining regions of the world, which Mackinder locates in the outer or insular crescent, are but satellites of the World-Island, due to their comparably far smaller dimensions and power potentials.

Hence, in the post-Columbian world (from 20th century up until now), England loses its centrality; the centre of the world becomes the heartland of the World-Island because the possible “oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight”¹⁶. The strategic aim for the satellites of the World-Island, especially of the actor that enjoys the command of the sea, cannot but be anything other than to *prevent* such an oversetting of the balance of power. The identity of the pivot state may change according to international contingencies, but the fact remains that the world that began at the beginning of the 20th century is a post-Colombian one. States are forced to behave accordingly. According to Mackinder, in 1904 the pivot state was Russia, in 1919 it was Germany as it was again in 1943, albeit his disciples would see it as the USSR during the Cold War. Mackinder also posited that China could play the role of the pivot state.

II

While Mackinder posited the beginning of a new geo-historical period, in the United States Admiral Alfred Mahan pondered the changes that were occurring in world politics. While Mahan’s theory shares several similarities with his British colleague, it refuses to see North America as one of the many satellites of the World-Island. Mahan thinks that in the 20th century the United States inherits the role played by England in the Columbian world, an England grown too small to face

¹⁶ Halford Mackinder, *The geographical pivot of history*, in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, op. cit., pp. 191-2.

competition with the new continental states. Mahan writes: “The United States is to all intents an insular power, like Great Britain. We have but two land frontiers, Canada and Mexico. The latter is hopelessly inferior to us in all the elements of military strength. As regards Canada [...] its numbers indicate clearly that aggression will never be her policy [...] We are, it may be repeated, an insular power, dependent therefore upon a navy.”¹⁷

Mahan promoted the valorisation of the United States’ insularity by building a huge military and commercial fleet, linking the United States’ littorals through the Panama Canal, turning the “American Mediterranean” into the US internal lake, expanding vertically on America and horizontally through the oceans: roadmaps that were eventually followed by the American government. The heartland of Eurasia will not become the centre of the world, for the “unity of the ocean” remains the real seat of world power – and since the United States is to become the real world island, the United States is a place at the centre of the world. Mahan writes: “Let us start from the fundamental truth, warranted by history, that the control of the seas, and especially along the great lines drawn by national interest or national commerce, is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations. It is so because the sea is the world's great medium of circulation. From this necessarily follows the principle that, as subsidiary to such control, it is imperative to take possession, when it can be done righteously, of such maritime positions as contribute to secure command.”¹⁸

At the beginning of the post-Columbian period, the United States followed Mahan’s insights and promoted a double line of expansion – a vertical and a horizontal one – in order to become the true contemporary island. Vertically, by cutting the Panama Canal – an operation that was strongly advocated by Mahan – the United States obtained the condition of bi-oceanicity with its Eastern and

¹⁷ Alfred Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power*, Boston, 1917, pp. 210-1.

¹⁸ Alfred Mahan, *The Interest of America*, op. cit., p. 52.

Western coasts connected by sea. In the south, the United States promoted the expulsion of European powers, and turned the Caribbean Sea and the Mexican Sea (the “American Mediterranean”), into an internal American lake. Moreover, through an aggressive updating of the Monroe Doctrine, the US promoted, as Tiberio Graziani writes, “geopolitical unity for North America [and] excessive fragmentation for Central and South America”.¹⁹

As for horizontal expansion, Mahan argued for the need to inherit the British maritime empire, maintain the balance of power in Europe so that a bidder hegemon would not arise, and to maintain the balance of power in the Mediterranean Sea (the Euro-Arab Mediterranean) in order to enjoy “free access to the Suez Canal”, for it connects the Euro-Arab Mediterranean with the Persian Gulf. Then, the Persian Gulf connects with the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and, eventually, through the Panama Canal it is possible to reach the Atlantic again. By exercising maritime hegemony and control over these routes, one creates what Mahan calls the “unity of the ocean” which, according to the Admiral, is the main seat of world power. Maritime hegemony can be partially relieved and shared with secondary sea power (for Mahan, England and Japan). Just as it is for Europe, the balance of power in the Middle East and in Asia must not be upset, the only difference being the so-called “problem of Asia”. Contrary to Europe, Asia is a “vast, uninterrupted mass” of land where “no political obstacle intervenes to impede the concentrated action of the disposable strength”²⁰ (the landlocked heartland of Mackinder). While Europe shows a high number of political actors, in Asia there are mostly two, Russia and China, which require different strategies for the US. As for Russia, it must be prevented from obtaining secure and continuous access to the ocean, which would solve a major Russian geographical weakness; as for China, “the principal objects to

¹⁹ Tiberio Graziani, *Il risveglio dell’America indiolatina*, eurasia-rivista.com, 1 July 2007.

²⁰ Alfred Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and its Effect Upon International Policies*, Boston, 1900, p. 24.

be kept in view [...] are. I. Prevention of preponderant political control by any one external state, or group of states; and, 2. Insistence upon the open door, in a broader sense”²¹.

Mahan’s insights on the United States as the major world island and sea power in the globalised world have been further developed by Isaiah Bowman. Specifically, Bowman develops the analysis of geo-economic processes and of financial operations of market control as part of power relations amongst nations, his aim being the promotion of a geo-economic macro-analysis *ante litteram* that would tie the United States’ naval power to financial and economic ones. Bowman has also reinforced the thesis concerning the interconnection of Latin America with the United States with a view to increasing its commercial outlets in South America while decreasing European ones²².

It must be noted that, in order to promote its horizontal expansion, during the First World War the United States fought an economic war *against* England in the view of forcing the British Empire to open its markets to US economic penetration²³. However, when Germany won on the eastern front, the United States fought militarily against Germany in order to prevent the unification of the European peninsula. After the war, it promoted the fractioning of the European continental empires (German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires) that were promoting the unification of the euro-Mediterranean space. Chiantera-Stutte writes: “Bowman’s support for American expansionism is anchored in the idea that the United States is responsible for world balance and democracy: peace in Europe guarantees, in this perspective, free trade and, *vice versa*, the opening of states to

²¹ Ivi, p. 167.

²² Isaiah Bowman, *The New World: Problems in Politics Geography*, New York, World Book, 1921.

²³ Romolo Gobbi, *America contro Europa: l’antieuropeismo degli americani dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, M&B, Milano, p. 189.

foreign investment and markets promotes the penetration of liberal democratic ideas”²⁴.

The “completion of classical Anglo-Saxon geopolitics”²⁵ was reached with Nicholas Spykman who moved the seats of world power from the unity of the ocean (Mahan) or the heartland (Mackinder) to the rimland, i.e. the Eurasian borderlines (similar to Mackinder’s inner crescent). Indeed, Spykman posited that “the pupils of Admiral Mahan notwithstanding”, a world hegemony based upon sea power alone is not enough. As the English example shows, “Great Britain never ruled the world because of her sea power alone [but it] was dominant during the [Columbian] period when Europe was the only centre of power and when the European Continent could be neutralised by balancing its forces. The world of today contains three centres of power”²⁶: North America, Europe, and East Asia.

The peril that constitutes this distribution of power is that the latter two centres of power are located at the periphery of Eurasia (Mackinder’s World-Island), in practice surrounding the American hemisphere. The United States finds, therefore, itself in a position similar to that of England during the Colombian period, but with the whole Eurasian continent constituting what Europe constituted for England. This geographical fact poses “the [permanent] threat of an encirclement of the United States by a European-Asiatic combination. [...] Our power position in the world, which has always depended on the existence of a balance of power in Europe and Asia, is now threatened by a combination between unified hemispheres across the seas”²⁷. Even worse, such a combination of forces between two bidder Eurasian

²⁴ Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, *Il pensiero geopolitico. Spazio, potere e imperialismo tra Otto e Novecento*, Carrocci, Roma, 2014, p. 140.

²⁵ Federico Bordonaro, *La geopolitica anglosassone*, Milano, Guerini, 2012, 116.

²⁶ Nicholas Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics. The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York, 1942, p. 459.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 195.

hegemony would be “under modern conditions of world politics [...] a logical”²⁸ choice for the two would-be hegemony. Such an alliance would help them achieve hegemony in their own Mediterranean Sea against an extra-regional power’s will. Additionally, after achieving regional hegemony, they may organise the heartland of Eurasia under their clout, thus denying the heartland’s resource to America and eventually turning against the Western Hemisphere. Spykman’s conclusion is therefore very simple: “hemisphere defence by the United States is in a large measure defence of overseas territory by means of naval and air operations in areas far distant from their bases”²⁹; this is why the US needs to “permanently” settle its military bases on the Eurasian rimland and tie the economy of this region to America’s: the goal is the maintenance of the balance of power in Eurasia. The world strategy of the United States cannot be anything other than threefold: first, maintaining hegemony in America; second, maintaining the command of the unity of the ocean; and third, preventing the organisation of Eurasia by local powers, specifically in the rimland.

During the Second World War, the United States fought Germany and Japan because they were a bidder of hegemony in the two centres of power in Eurasia. But, as acknowledged by Spykman, since the balance of power in Eurasia is “permanently dead”, the United States has not only an interest in winning the war against, but also in winning the peace. After the Second World War, the United States effectively built its world hegemony following Spykman’s “geography of peace”³⁰ suggestions. Post-war *pax Americana* was an American world hegemony that needed to “move the centre of world power from Europe to the United States”, while the two terminal lands of Eurasia, i.e. Europe and East Asia, “would have played the subordinate role of an advanced territorial post, truly a bridgehead of the

²⁸ Ivi, p. 174

²⁹ Ivi, p. 413

³⁰ Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of Peace*, Yale, 1944.

West towards Eurasia”³¹. Spykman’s strategy for the United States outlines a dichotomous and permanent conflict between the “new world”, i.e. America under US hegemony, and the “old world”, i.e. Eurasia, where the United States must prevent the rising of an hegemon in the rimland.

As, according to American geopolitics, the seats of power in Eurasia are situated in the rimland and not in the heartland (contrary to Mackinder), the construction of the world of Yalta was actively promoted by the United States. Yalta was an imperfect bipolar system, for it saw the conflict between a United States enriched by the Second World War and a Soviet Union that, on the contrary, was weakened by the war. The strategy of containment’s aim, which Spykman envisaged with Kennan and which characterised the basis of American foreign policy during the Cold War, prevented the Soviet Union from joining its territorial vastness and resources (heartland) with demography, industries and capitals of the Eurasian rimland (i.e. the major centres of power in Eurasia), which remained part of the Western world. In the words of Jean Thiriart, the Soviet Union was an “uncompleted power”³², for it was a superpower that lacked control over Eurasian contiguous regions. Specifically, it lacked control over half of the European peninsula and over the Euro-Arab Mediterranean. The United States, on the contrary, was a complete power, for it completely controlled North America and the American Mediterranean. Thus, while both the Soviet Union and the United States may have been the two superpowers of the Yalta world, only the latter reached regional hegemony, and thus it enjoyed a systemic advantage over Moscow throughout the Cold War.

³¹ Carlo Maria Santoro, *Studi di geopolitica 1992-1994*, Giappichelli, Torino, 1997, p. 75.

³² Jean Thiriart, *L’Impero euro sovietico da Vladivostok a Dublino*, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, 2018.

III

The works of Mackinder, Mahan, and Spykman still form the core of the United States' geopolitical doctrine: they constitute the polar star that guides the US actions in the still ongoing post-Columbian era³³.

American diplomat, Secretary of State and geo-politologist Henri Kissinger writes:

Geopolitically, America is an island off the great Eurasian continent. The dominance by a single power of one of the two main sphere of Eurasia – Europe or Asia – constitutes a good definition of a strategic danger for the United States, Cold War or not. This danger must be averted even if that power shows no aggressive intentions, for if that power were to become aggressive later, America would find itself with a much diminished capacity for effective resistance and an increasing inability to influence events.

American National Security advisor and political analyst Zbigniew Brzezinski adds:

Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would automatically control the Middle East and Africa. With Eurasia now serving as the decisive geopolitical [...] Eurasia's potential power overshadows even America's. [The strategy of the US is therefore] to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the United States or even diminish its decisive role [...] in Eurasia³⁴

³³ Marco Ghisetti, *Talassocrazia. I fondamenti della geopolitica anglo-statunitense*, Anteo, Cavriago, 2021.

³⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *A Geostrategy for Eurasia*, in "Foreign Affairs", Vol. 76, No. 5, Sep.-Oct., 1997, 50-1.

Summarizing US's geopolitical studies, scholar Phil Kelly concludes:

All geopolitical strategic visions portray Eurasia as the central factor. Just as for Britain, also for the United States it is there where the main (albeit more distant) security threat comes from. [...] The awareness of its vulnerability towards Eurasia has long been present in US geopolitical thinking, and continues to be so today. [...] US geopolitics is closely linked to the basic principles of the classical doctrine of the British. [...] They both portray themselves as an 'island', flanked by a menacing continental mass that must be kept divided to assure their security³⁵.

No less a person than Kissinger himself summarises the meaning of US military interventions during the twentieth century in the following way: "In the first half of the twentieth century, the United States fought two wars to prevent the domination of Europe by a potential adversary [...] in the second half of the twentieth century (actually from 1941 onwards), it fought three wars to defend the same principle in Asia – against Japan, in Korea and in Vietnam"³⁶. It is noticeable that in just two sentences Kissinger reveals the meaning of the wars fought by the United States throughout the twentieth century, stripping them of the ideological justifications (anti-fascist, anti-communist wars, wars for freedom, democracy, civilisation, and so on).

During the Second World War, Japan's aim to create a more or less rhetorical "sphere of co-prosperity" in East Asia implied the becoming of Japan as the regional hegemon in the Asian Mediterranean, as well as a Japanese "preponderant political control" over China – something that Mackinder, Mahan and Spykman had clearly warned against. And, as John Mearsheimer writes, the American aim in the Pacific

³⁵ Phil Kelly, *Geopolitica degli Stati Uniti d'America*, in "Eurasia. Rivista di studigeopolitici", Vol. 3/2010, p. 31.

³⁶ Henri Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, Simon & Schuster, 2002, 110.

was “to crush Japan before it achieved regional hegemony”³⁷ in the Asian Mediterranean. Following the Japanese defeat, the United States has firmly settled in the Asian Mediterranean, according to Spykman’s geography of peace insights.

Likewise, as Manlio Graziano reconstructs, the core-aim of the US interventions in the Korean (1950-1953) and Vietnamese (1965-1975) wars was not so much ideological fear of communism as the fear that if the South-East Asian states gradually turned to the Soviet Union or China, then the same political choice would soon been implemented by Japan as well³⁸. Had it happened, the economic superpower of Japan (rimland) would have joined the heartland (communist bloc). In other words, the roots of the so-called “domino theory”, according to which a single state falling to the Soviet camp would lead to the fall of many other states, are much more geopolitical than ideological. While it is true that the United States reached an armistice in Korea and in Vietnam was military defeated, the US nevertheless accomplished a far more important goal: the prevention of a local power gaining control of one of the Eurasian centres of power, thus witnessing the rise of a potential hegemon in Asia. The conclusion that it must be drawn from this is that the famous pictures of the US army rushing away from Vietnam, while spectacular, do not capture an American defeat at all.

IV

The inglorious collapse of the USSR in 1989-91 marked the beginning of a United States unipolar moment, the United States being the sole world superpower. Since during the Cold War the USSR was America’s convenient enemy, its fall

³⁷ John Mearsheimer, *La logica di potenza. L’America, le guerre e il controllo del mondo*, Milano, UBE, 2008,

³⁸ Manlio Graziano, *L’isola al centro del mondo, Una geopolitica degli Stati Uniti*, Mulino, Bologna, 2018, p. 330

implied an increase in the relative power of the nations of the rimland, as well as the possibility for them to expand towards the heartland. Manlio Graziano writes:

Military intervention in the Balkans and NATO enlargement to the east (and to some extent also the Oslo Accords) were implemented to stop, or at least slow down, the European [unification] process. [...] Since the meaning of the containment policy was to ‘prevent domination of Europe by a potential adversary’, it would have been inadmissible to leave Central and Eastern Europe in the hands of a European ‘potential adversary’, which could also collude with Russia³⁹.

The same is true of the Middle East, invaded and occupied by the United States in order to control local resources and, through the promotion of chaos and instability, fraction states (the so-called Great Middle East plan) or, at least, slow down the integration processes between rimland and heartland that were launched after the fall of the USSR. This was the meaning of US invasion of Afghanistan⁴⁰.

As for East Asia, it is interesting to note that, while China is regarded as a juicy market to conquer, a sovereign China that transforms its economic power into military and political influence is as much an anathema as a united Europe. During the Second World War the United States fought Japan in order to prevent the Japanese from impeding “the plan to turn the People’s Republic of China into an American economic colony [which was eventually and] officially inaugurated half a century ago, in April 1971, with the famous table tennis match”. As of today this plan “has miserably failed: the investments poured into China have been wisely

³⁹ Manlio Graziano, *L’isola al centro del mondo. Una geopolitica degli Stati Uniti*, Mulino, Bologna, 2018, pp. 331-2.

⁴⁰ Amedeo Maddaluno, *Afghanistan, il ritorno dei Talebani. Cosa è successo nel cuore dell’Asia*, goWare, 2021. Thus, just like the American retreat from Vietnam does not constitute a defeat, the recent American retreat from Afghanistan is not a defeat, albeit the United States did not manage to fraction the entire Middle East, as they intended.

used by the People's Republic to take on a fundamental role in world politics"⁴¹. China is now a bidder for regional hegemony in the East Asian rimland.

V

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, François Thual notes a paradox in world politics: while modernity witnessed the unification of medieval political microstructures, contemporaneity witnesses a multiplication of “geopolitical impotencies” or, to state it differently, contemporaneity has been witnessing the fragmentation (along more or less artificial ethno-cultural lines) of the empires and of medium-large States into small States, which are States that are sovereign only on a nominal basis. The “fragmentation of the planet” as the “supreme stage of globalisation”⁴², Thual writes, can be explained in terms of the fact that “the parcelling out of the planet is the result of genetic manipulations [...] the expression of a voluntarism [...] with real States and States that could be labelled as ‘faded’, and are generally ‘dominated States’”⁴³.

Thual's findings have been developed by Tiberio Graziani, who argues that the policy of splitting up the planet is mostly carried out by the United States. According to Graziani, throughout the twentieth century the US prevented the formation of large spaces outside North America, and promoted the liquidation of the European and Asian empires. Once the Cold War was over, the US initiated “a process of destabilisation [...] of the Eurasian space [...] synergic with the one initiated by the US in the Caucasian area [as well as] in the Hispanic-American

⁴¹ Claudio Mutti, *Guerra senza limiti*, in “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici”, Vol. 4/2020, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, p. 10.

⁴² François Thual, *Il mondo fatto a pezzi*, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, 2008, p. 113.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 109.

‘crescent region’⁴⁴. This was so because at the end of the Cold War the US intended to prevent the emergence of a challenger in Eurasia by promoting the fractionation of the world. Using John Mearsheimer’s words, the United States, after becoming the sole “regional hegemon” in the world, does everything it can “to weaken, and even to destroy”⁴⁵ a state that bids to the same with its macro-region. The US, through this “process of destabilisation [...] of the Eurasian space”⁴⁶ aimed at taking advantage of its two main pillars of power – “the role of Wall Street as the undisputed financial centre of the world [and] the war power of the Pentagon”⁴⁷ – to fraction what Brzezinski labelled as the “grand chessboard” (the World-Island). In Washington’s view, this would have made the US to be “first, only, and last truly superpower”⁴⁸.

The drive of continental integration is precisely the opposite of the United States’ fractioning drive, and it is the one that can truly defeat US hegemony. This tendency towards integration is pursued mainly by two continental States, Russia and China, who have an interest in preventing a further fragmentation of the planet that would favour Washington. The slow and patient Sino-Russian weaving projects, which have recently been joined by Iran, are bearing fruits: entire Middle Eastern and Central Asian regions have been stabilised and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the US to project what is regarded as being its disruptive influence⁴⁹. An interest in such stabilisation and expulsion is also shared by many Middle Eastern and Central Asian States, who want to be sure that “no Islamist or

⁴⁴ Tiberio Graziani, *Il tempo dei continenti e la destabilizzazione del pianeta*, eurasia-rivista.org, 1 May 2008.

⁴⁵ John Mearsheimer, *La logica di potenza* op. cit., p. 39.

⁴⁶ Tiberio Graziani, *Il tempo dei continenti*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ William Engdahl, *L’odierna posizione geopolitica degli Usa*, in “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici”, Vol. 3/2010, p. 57.

⁴⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1998, p. 215.

⁴⁹ Paul Bolt, Sharyl Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, Oxford, 2018.

color revolutions threaten their rule. Whereas they view with great suspicious any Western attempts to open up their societies, [they] welcome Russian and Chinese support”⁵⁰. All this has “greatly irritated those European and overseas lobbies that hoped [...] for the unification of the planet under Washington’s aegis”⁵¹.

Specifically, Russian interest is to “interrupt The American march eastwards by methodically weaving a system of strategic alliances with China, the Indian subcontinent and Iran”⁵², thus safeguarding its sovereignty through the construction of a multipolar world order. As for China, Beijing has managed to open to international trade, capitals and commerce while maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The former Celestial Empire is now in a position to pursue regional hegemony in East Asia. The continuous Chinese references made to the Asian Mediterranean as their territorial waters unveils Beijing’s intention to turn those waters into a Chinese lake. However, from an extra-regional actor’s point of view such a project would not be that different from the Nipponese attempt to create an Asian sphere of co-prosperity or the communist block’s attempt to break the American containment. In fact, these are projects against which the United States decided to fight hot wars. Moreover, since China is a semi-insular power but not a bi-oceanic one, its major geopolitical and geoeconomic project, the Belt and Road Initiative, is constituted by a maritime as well as a terrestrial part – the aim of which is to organise the World-Island under Beijing’s leadership.

Claudio Mutti, commenting on the Sino-Russian integration projects, writes: “The prospect of a rapprochement between Europe and Russia, which is so distressing to the United States, turns into a nightmare in Washington when one considers that, at the end of the Belt and Road Initiative integration project, Russia and Europe could be joined by China. Should that happen, Eurasia would become

⁵⁰ Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, Twelve, 2019.

⁵¹ Tiberio Graziani, *Il tempo dei continenti*, op. cit.

⁵² Tiberio Graziani, *Editoriale*, in “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici”, Vol. 2/2005, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, p. 5.

the seat of world geopolitical power.”⁵³ Indeed, if China manages to integrate and organise Eurasia under its leadership (a project that needs other Eurasian powers’ active collaboration), the major seat of power will return to Eurasia, as it was before the Island cut off the umbilical cord that kept it tied to the Continent. Only in this case we will witness the fall of the United States’ hegemony.

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⁵³ Claudio Mutti, *Editoriale*, eurasia-sito.com, 15 September 2020.



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