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Abstract - This article examines Nicholas Spykman's contribution to American geopolitical strategy, focusing on his work *"America's Strategy in World Politics"* (1942). Spykman critiques isolationism and emphasizes the need for the United States' global engagement to maintain a balance of power worldwide. His analysis revolves around four main themes: the nature of power, balance of power, international relations, and political geography. While the Rimland theory was fully developed later, its foundations are evident in his observations on the strategic importance of Eurasia's marginal areas. Spykman advocates for regional cooperation frameworks and collective security systems to manage global conflicts, anticipating Cold War dynamics. His realist perspective is enriched by a sociological foundation influenced by Georg Simmel, focusing on the interplay between conflict and socialization.

Keywords: American strategy, Rimland, Nicholas Spykman, Sociology, George Simmel.

1. A Divisive Work: Political Realism vs. Moral Idealism

America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power, published in 1942, sparked great debate from the moment it appeared. Nicholas Spykman, a Yale professor and a pioneer of American geopolitics, presented a realist vision of international relations that clashed directly with the moral idealism then prevalent in U.S. political discourse. The book was harshly criticized, labeled "nihilistic" and "neo-Machiavellian," and accused of embodying the cynicism of Prussian policies or even the Machiavellian theories promoted in *Mein Kampf*.

The essence of the work does not lie in celebrating force or war, but in its unsparing analysis of the balance of power as a fundamental principle to preserve international stability while protecting U.S. interests. For Spykman, balance is not a moral goal but a strategic necessity in an anarchic international system where no central government can prevent the rise of regional hegemonies. This realist vision, far removed from Wilsonian idealism, anticipated many of the strategies the United States would adopt during the Cold War, including the containment of the Soviet Union.

Spykman's approach, which openly challenged traditional American isolationism, attracted criticism but also support from those who recognized the need for global U.S. engagement to avoid another international disaster. The controversies surrounding the book reflect not only the political climate of the time but also the discomfort of embracing a vision in which power is conceived as an essential tool to prevent conflict and maintain security.

2. A Challenging Path to Publication

The creation of *America's Strategy in World Politics* was a long and arduous process, shaped by global historical events and personal circumstances that directly influenced the writing. The work was conceived in 1935 as part of a project by the Yale Institute of International Studies (YIIS). Spykman began working on a study titled *The Position of the United States in World Affairs*, intended to analyze the global position of the U.S. in a relatively stable international system.

The first draft, completed in 1939, reflected a world still dominated by the consequences of World War I, with regional tensions but no active global conflict. However, the outbreak of World

War II in September of that year drastically altered the international landscape. The eruption of conflict in Europe and significant shifts in power relations between nations rendered many examples and arguments in the original draft obsolete.

In the YIIS annual report for 1939-1940, Spykman observed that the project needed to be reoriented to address new international realities. His declining health further complicated the writing process: from 1940 onward, Spykman had to reduce his teaching load and relinquish many of his academic responsibilities. However, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the U.S. entry into the war provided Spykman with a definitive context to complete the work.

The manuscript, originally titled *Hemisphere Defense*, was reworked to include a critique of American isolationism and a broader reflection on the necessity of global engagement. When it was published in March 1942 as *America's Strategy in World Politics*, the book was not only a geopolitical analysis but a strategic appeal for the U.S. to take an active role in shaping the world order.

3. Structure of the Book: Theory and Practical Application

The book is divided into two distinct but complementary parts. The first part is dedicated to a theoretical analysis of international relations, addressing topics such as the nature of power, the role of geography, and the importance of the balance of power. Spykman examines the international system through a realist lens, arguing that states act to maximize their security in an anarchic context. The balance of power is not a moral objective but a pragmatic tool to prevent a single power from dominating the system.

The second part focuses on South America, used as a case study to demonstrate the unsustainability of hemisphere defense. Spykman shows that the Americas, often perceived as isolated and protected from global threats, are in fact vulnerable to external pressures. He provides a detailed analysis of the geopolitical position of South American countries, showing how internal divisions and economic weakness make them susceptible to foreign influence. This part of the book not only highlights the limits of isolationism but underscores the necessity for the United States to adopt a global strategy to protect its interests.

4. Power as the Foundation of International Relations

Spykman opens the book with an in-depth analysis of the concept of power, defining it as the capacity to influence others to achieve political and social objectives. He adopts a sociological approach inspired by Georg Simmel's theory of conflict, demonstrating that power is not an anomaly but an inevitable component of social life. According to Spykman, power is the driving force that regulates relations between states, just as it does within social groups.

By distinguishing between direct actions, such as war, and indirect actions, such as diplomacy, Spykman emphasizes that both reflect a competition for survival. For states, improving their relative power position is essential to ensure their security in an international system without a central authority. He critiques the American tendency to view power as inherently negative, arguing that it is a necessary tool to prevent conflict and preserve stability.

5. Geography and Strategy: A Global Perspective

For Spykman, geography is a fundamental constant that determines the strategic possibilities of a state. He builds on Halford Mackinder's theories but significantly reworks them. While Mackinder saw the Heartland—the continental core of Eurasia—as the key to global dominance, Spykman shifts the focus to the Rimland, the coastal regions surrounding the Heartland. According

to Spykman¹, the Rimland is crucial for geopolitical control because it combines maritime access with terrestrial resources. Spykman warns that the United States must prevent any single power from dominating these strategic areas, as this would endanger national security. This insight would form the foundation of U.S. Cold War strategies, particularly the doctrine of containment.

6. Hemisphere Defense: A Dangerous Illusion

One of the central arguments in Spykman's book is his critique of the theory of hemisphere defense, a strategy popular in the United States at the time. This approach, championed by isolationists and parts of public opinion, rested on the belief that the United States could fortify the Americas and remain safe from global threats. South America was viewed as a "safe zone," far removed from the turbulence of Europe and Asia. Spykman dismantles this vision with a detailed analysis of South American geopolitics. He demonstrates that the continent is not an impregnable stronghold, but a fragile region exposed to the influence of foreign powers. Internal divisions among South American countries, economic weaknesses, and the lack of political unity make the hemisphere vulnerable. Spykman also warns that if Europe or Asia were to fall under the control of a single hegemonic power, the security of the Americas would be quickly compromised.

Hemisphere defense, Spykman argues, is a shortsighted and dangerous strategy². It ignores the interconnected nature of global politics and underestimates the importance of maintaining a balance of power in the world's strategic regions. According to Spykman, U.S. security cannot be guaranteed through isolation but requires active global engagement to preserve international stability.

7. World War II as a Validation of Geopolitical Theories

World War II, for Spykman, serves as practical proof of the necessity for global U.S. involvement. Analysing the causes of the conflict, Spykman criticizes the failure of Western powers to prevent the rise of Nazi Germany and militarist Japan. These failures, he argues, stem from strategic errors made after World War I, particularly the absence of American involvement in maintaining the European balance of power.

The war also exposes the limitations of a strategy based solely on regional security. Spykman argues that American isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s only facilitated the expansion of revisionist powers. He warns that even after the defeat of the Axis powers, new geopolitical challenges will emerge, particularly from Russia and China.

Spykman predicts that the end of the global conflict will not coincide with the end of international tensions. On the contrary, peace itself will remain unstable unless measures are taken to ensure that no single power in Europe or Asia can dominate the international system. World War II, therefore, is not just a historical turning point but a geopolitical lesson on the importance of sustained efforts to preserve the balance of power³.

8. Post-War Strategies: An Unstable but Necessary Balance

In the concluding part of the book, Spykman addresses post-war challenges and outlines three possible scenarios for the global order. The first scenario envisions the creation of a unified

¹ Spykman's distinction between the Heartland and Rimland is a fundamental contribution to modern geopolitics and anticipates the strategic role of Eurasia's coasts in global politics.

² This critique foreshadowed the United States' subsequent global engagement, highlighting the impracticality of isolationism in an increasingly interconnected world.

³ In this analysis, Spykman anticipates many Cold War dynamics, describing the polarization between the United States and the Soviet Union as an inevitable consequence of global power struggles.

world state, eliminating competition among nations. However, Spykman dismisses this as unrealistic, arguing that even in a unified system, conflicts would persist in the form of civil wars and insurgencies.

The second scenario is global domination by one or two hegemonic powers. Spykman examines this possibility, noting that some intellectuals of the time already envisioned an Anglo-American alliance to govern the world. However, he critiques this vision, emphasizing that the domination of a few powers would lead to instability and new conflicts.

The third scenario, which Spykman advocates, is an international system based on a balance of power managed through regional alliances. In this model, the United States assumes the role of a global stabilizer, actively engaging in international affairs to prevent hegemonic dominance in Europe and Asia. Spykman argues that Germany and Japan, once defeated, should be preserved as strategic counterweights to continental powers such as Russia and China.

He emphasizes the importance of creating regional organizations that include the United States as a stabilizing member, anticipating⁴ the establishment of alliances like NATO and ASEAN. While imperfect, this system of balance is, for Spykman, the most practical solution for ensuring stability in a fragmented world.

9. A Pragmatic Vision for an Unstable World

Spykman's work concludes with a call for a realistic and pragmatic approach to international relations. He reiterates that the balance of power, while not an ideal solution, is the best available tool to prevent conflicts and preserve stability. Spykman emphasizes that the balance of power cannot be left to chance: it requires active and constant intervention by states to maintain a distribution of forces favorable to stability.

Spykman describes the international system as dynamic and ever-changing, with interactions among states constantly evolving. For this reason, he rejects simplistic or utopian solutions, instead proposing a flexible model that combines regional cooperation with global engagement. According to Spykman, the United States must take a leadership role in this system—not to seek supremacy but to ensure that no single power destabilizes the system.

The legacy of America's Strategy in World Politics lies in Spykman's ability to connect theoretical analysis with practical proposals, offering a geopolitical vision that remains relevant for understanding modern international dynamics.

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⁴ Spykman's reflections on the post-war period demonstrate remarkable foresight, predicting many institutional structures and geopolitical strategies that would shape the second half of the 20th century.

Giuseppe Gagliano – *In 2011 he founded the international network Cestudec (Centro studi strategici Carlo de Cristoforis) based in Como, with the aim of studying the conflictual dynamics of international relations from a realistic perspective, placing emphasis on the dimension of intelligence and geopolitics in the light of the reflections of Christian Harbulot, founder and director of the School of Economic Warfare (EGE). Gagliano has published four essays in French on economic warfare and ten essays in Italian on geopolitics.*



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