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THE IMPERIAL DREAM OF GLOBAL CONTROL
A Geographer in Service of the Empire

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Abstract - *This essay explores the role of Halford Mackinder and Isaiah Bowman in shaping the transformation of Anglo-American geopolitics between the 20th and 21st centuries. After World War II, geopolitics became a controversial discipline, partly due to its association with German Geopolitik and geographical determinism. However, in the United States, it remained central to strategic and political studies, albeit redefined under new paradigms. Mackinder, known for his Heartland theory, argued for the necessity of global power balance to prevent the dominance of a single Eurasian power, significantly influencing Cold War strategy and the creation of NATO. Bowman, on the other hand, emphasized economic geopolitics, arguing that future conflicts would no longer be fought between territorial borders but between economic systems.*

The essay examines the transition from classical geopolitics, based on a rigid distinction between maritime and land powers, to a more fluid and globalized approach, where free trade and control over global economic infrastructure become instruments of hegemony. Finally, it explores Mackinder and Bowman's intellectual legacy in the current U.S.-China competition, focusing on China's Belt and Road Initiative as a direct challenge to U.S. maritime supremacy.

Keywords: *Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, Isaiah Bowman, Heartland Theory*

Halford Mackinder was one of the most influential figures in the development of modern geopolitics, alongside Friedrich Ratzel. His work was not limited to his academic career, which culminated in his directorship of the London School of Economics in 1903, but extended into politics, where he actively engaged in the strategic construction of the British Empire. He participated in the Coefficients Dining Club, an elite circle of intellectuals and economists, including Bertrand Russell and H.G. Wells, who debated the political and social reforms necessary to consolidate British hegemony. His political trajectory initially saw him as a member of the Liberal Party, but he abandoned it in 1904 in favor of the Conservatives, supporting Joseph Chamberlain's protectionist policies.

After World War I, in 1919, the British government entrusted him with the delicate mission of serving as High Commissioner in Russia, with the task of negotiating a non-aggression policy with the newly independent Caucasian states and opening Soviet borders to British markets. This assignment reflected Mackinder's belief that Russia played a central role in global geopolitics and that the future of British dominance depended on containing emerging land powers.

Geopolitics as a Science of Survival

Mackinder's vision was deeply influenced by social Darwinism. He perceived international relations as a struggle for survival, where only the strongest nations would thrive. In 1905, he explicitly stated: "Nature is ruthless, and we must create a power capable of competing on equal terms with other powers or accept the suffering of subjugation." In this perspective, geography was not merely a descriptive science but an essential tool for understanding and dominating the world.

He saw geography as a bridge between science, art, and philosophy. On one hand, it analyzed the distribution of living beings and the Earth's characteristics in a scientific manner. On the other, it required aesthetic sensitivity for cartographic representation, while also offering a philosophical vision of the relationship between humans and nature. According to Mackinder, geography's interdisciplinary nature was its greatest strength, as it connected human and natural sciences, forming a unified worldview.

The Role of Geography in Shaping Imperial Mentality

One of Mackinder's primary goals was to modernize British education, placing geography at the core of training for imperial citizens. In 1901, he wrote: "The entire future of Great Britain depends on this," and he actively campaigned for the establishment of geography professorships, bringing Britain on par with France and Germany. His efforts were not confined to academia—Mackinder believed that geography should shape citizens capable of thinking in imperial terms.

Driven by this conviction, Mackinder launched an ideological campaign aimed at shaping the mindset of young Britons, so they would view the world as a geopolitical arena of competition. He argued that Britons should be educated to visualize global geographical conditions, developing an imperial consciousness and a strategic mindset that would make them protagonists in world politics. For him, geography was not neutral but rather a tool for consolidating the British Empire.

Geopolitical Balance and the Threat of Land Powers

Mackinder stood out for his ability to develop a geopolitical model that went beyond the traditional maritime vs. land power dichotomy. In his famous *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904), he identified three major epochs in geopolitical history:

1. The Pre-Modern Era – Dominated by barbarian invasions, with Asian land powers constantly threatening Europe.
2. The Columbian Era – Marked by the rise of European maritime powers, which through navigation and global trade managed to free themselves from Asian dominance.
3. The Post-Columbian Era – Characterized by global closure, where maritime powers must now confront a growing threat from land powers, which now possess new transportation technologies such as railways.

According to Mackinder, railroad expansion disrupted the balance that had previously favored maritime powers. Historically, land empires were limited by distances and the absence of efficient transportation networks. However, with the advent of modern infrastructure, whoever controlled the Eurasian Heartland had the potential to dominate the world.

He formulated the famous axiom:

- Who controls Eastern Europe dominates the Heartland.
- Who controls the Heartland commands the World-Island (Eurasia and Africa).
- Who commands the World-Island controls the World.

From this perspective, Russia was the greatest threat to British hegemony, particularly if it allied with Germany.

The Danger of a World Without Balance

After World War I, Mackinder updated his theory in his 1919 work, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, where he emphasized that global stability depended on maintaining a balance of power. According to him, the Treaty of Versailles had failed to address the fundamental problem: the risk that a single continental power could emerge and dominate Eurasia.

To prevent this scenario, he proposed a strategy based on three key pillars:

1. Dividing Central and Eastern Europe into buffer states, to prevent Russian and German expansion.
2. Assigning the U.S. and the U.K. as global stability guarantors.
3. Maintaining strong maritime superiority, to counterbalance land powers.

Mackinder feared that, without constant vigilance by Anglo-Saxon powers, the world would fall under the dominance of a single hegemonic force, leading to a new form of global despotism.

Conclusion: Mackinder's Legacy in Contemporary Geopolitics

Mackinder's ideas had a lasting impact on geopolitics. During the Cold War, the U.S. containment strategy against the Soviet Union was based precisely on his principle that no single power should control the Eurasian Heartland. NATO was created with this explicit objective, and U.S. foreign policy continued to be guided by the fear that a continental power could challenge Anglo-American maritime supremacy.

Even today, the competition between the U.S. and China can be interpreted through Mackinder's geopolitical lens. China's Belt and Road Initiative is a strategic attempt to establish an infrastructure network connecting the Heartland to global markets, directly challenging U.S. maritime dominance.

Mackinder's legacy lies in his ability to perceive geopolitics as a dynamic system, where technologies, economies, and strategies evolve, but the fundamental laws of power remain unchanged. The struggle between land and sea, between continental and maritime powers, continues to shape the fate of the world.

THE DUALISM OF GEOPOLITICS: HALFORD MACKINDER AND ISAIAH BOWMAN BETWEEN IDEALISM AND REALISM

Post-War Geopolitics and Its "Clandestine" Phase

After World War II, geopolitics entered a phase of forced obscurity. The term itself became almost unmentionable in academic and political circles, to the point that any reference to German Geopolitik was systematically removed or denigrated. The discipline was accused of having provided the theoretical foundations for Nazi expansionism and the logic of territorial domination,

thus contributing to one of the greatest human tragedies. However, this apparent rejection of geopolitics was more superficial than substantive: in the United States, geopolitical studies remained central to global strategy, albeit under new labels and paradigms adapted to American hegemony.

The challenge for leading Anglo-American geopolitical thinkers, such as Halford Mackinder and Isaiah Bowman, was to dissociate geopolitics from geographical determinism and the ideological implications of German nationalism. Their solution was a strategic transformation: redefining geopolitics as a discipline that emphasized global balance and international cooperation, rather than territorial conquest and dominance.

The Strategy to Rehabilitate Anglo-Saxon Geopolitics

Bowman and Mackinder faced the need to rethink the discipline by eliminating any suspicion of geographical determinism. Their theoretical operation was twofold:

1. Demonize the German school, labeling it as distorted and pseudo-scientific thought that had legitimized Nazi aggression.
2. Construct a new narrative that linked geopolitics to democratic principles and free trade, distancing it from European imperialist theories.

Geographical determinism, which until then had been one of the fundamental axioms of classical geopolitics, was transformed into a methodological and moral error. German geopolitics was accused of having reduced history to a mere consequence of geographical conditions, denying the role of economics, culture, and political will. This approach allowed American scholars to maintain the centrality of geopolitics in strategic studies, without the risk of being associated with European totalitarianism.

At the same time, in the United States, the emerging discipline of International Relations absorbed many geopolitical insights. Scholars like Nicholas Spykman, who during World War II developed the Rimland theory (which identified the Eurasian coastal zone as a strategic area), helped keep geopolitics alive under another guise, highlighting how it was still the driving force behind global American strategies.

Isaiah Bowman and the New Economic Geopolitics

Isaiah Bowman, a prominent geographer in the U.S. administration, embodied the transition from classical geopolitics to a new conception centered on economics and global trade. In his book *The New World* (1921), Bowman redefined the very concept of international conflict, shifting it from territorial control to economic competition.

Bowman argued that wars did not arise solely from territorial rivalries but also from economic inequalities and poor management of global resources. From this perspective, the true battlefield of the future would not be the control of physical territories, but rather access to raw materials and global markets.

He proposed a deterritorialized geopolitics, where hegemony was not based on military conquest, but rather on control over trade routes, natural resources, and global economic infrastructure. According to Bowman, the new world order should be guaranteed by the United States and Great

Britain, the two great maritime powers, which were responsible for maintaining global balance through free trade.

Bowman rejected the idea of geopolitics based on territorial competition between empires. He argued that the great powers should promote the creation of an integrated global economy, avoiding the formation of autarkic and protectionist blocs. His thinking was closely aligned with the “Open Door” doctrine, which promoted economic liberalization as a tool for peace and international stability.

Mackinder: From Determinism to the Politics of Balance

Halford Mackinder, known for his Heartland theory, underwent a similar conceptual evolution. While in 1904, in his famous *The Geographical Pivot of History*, he had outlined a rigidly deterministic framework based on competition between land and maritime powers, by 1919, his thinking adapted to the new political needs of the post-war era.

In his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Mackinder distanced himself from geographical determinism, recognizing that international politics was not entirely dictated by a state’s geographical position, but also by political, economic, and social decisions. His new vision placed particular emphasis on the League of Nations as a tool to prevent the dominance of land powers and ensure a stable balance between states.

Mackinder argued that, although geography remained a crucial factor in geopolitical dynamics, it should not be considered an inescapable destiny. Human action and international diplomacy could transcend geographical constraints and create a more just and stable global order.

He proposed a system of buffer states in Eastern Europe to prevent Russian and German expansion, thereby ensuring continental stability. Furthermore, he assigned the Anglo-Saxon maritime powers the role of global security guarantors, emphasizing that only a combination of economic, military, and diplomatic power could maintain world order.

Idealism vs. Realism: A Geopolitical and Cultural Conflict

One of the most interesting aspects of the new geopolitics of Mackinder and Bowman was the construction of a dichotomy between idealism and realism, which profoundly influenced American strategic thought.

- Idealists (such as Woodrow Wilson and Bowman) believed in the possibility of creating a fairer world through international cooperation, free trade, and global institutions like the League of Nations.

- Realists (such as Mackinder and later Nicholas Spykman) argued that the balance of power was essential for stability and that nations would always act according to their strategic interests.

Mackinder, while adhering to Wilsonian ideals, recognized that the global balance could not be maintained solely through free trade and diplomacy; it also required constant vigilance and containment of emerging powers.

Bowman, on the other hand, shifted the focus to the need to expand the ideal of liberal capitalism on a global scale, arguing that the real geopolitical battle would not be fought between national borders, but between economic systems.

Conclusion: The Legacy of American Geopolitics

The evolution of Mackinder and Bowman's geopolitical thought marked the transition from a territorial and deterministic vision of geopolitics to a more fluid and globalized conception, based on economic competition and the management of power balances.

This transformation had a profound impact on American strategy during the Cold War, leading to the creation of NATO, the containment policy against the USSR, and the promotion of free markets as a tool of global dominance.

Ultimately, geopolitics never truly disappeared after World War II—it simply changed form, becoming the foundation of American foreign policy for the next century.

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