DETERMINISM VERSUS FRICTION: A CRITIQUE OF MACKINDER

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Introduction

"Mackinder was not a determinist," declared Colin S. Gray, arguably the most celebrated contemporary scholar of geopolitics.[1] He has further proclaimed that Mackinder's classic geopolitical theory "has outlasted the criticisms."[2] An ardent advocate of Mackinder, and of geopolitics as an enduring and "overwhelmingly relevant" field of study, Gray defends it vociferously: "Unfortunately, proclamation of the demise of geopolitics is at best premature, and much more likely is simply wrongheaded."[3] On the other hand, Christopher J. Fettweis is confident that "geopolitical analysis is already as obsolete as major war itself."[4]

Whilst geopolitics as a field of academic study has slowly descended into relative insignificance in the West, especially after the end of the Cold War, it has thrived throughout the former Soviet Union. Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard* has few competitors in ex-Soviet republics in terms of popularity among

[1] C.S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Superpower,* The University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1988, p. 7.

[2] C.S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," in: *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West,* ed. by Brian Blouet, Frank Cass, London, 2005, p. 24.

[3] Ibid., p. 20.

[4] Ch.J. Fettweis, "Revisiting Mackinder and Angell: The Obsolescence of Great Power Geopolitics", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 22, No. 2, April-June 2003, p. 119.

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students majoring in International Relations.[5] The "rose revolution" in Georgia of November 2003, the Ukrainian "orange revolution" of early 2005, the so-called "tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan of March 2005, and the ongoing endeavor to "spread democratic values" throughout the former Soviet Union by Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), might all be seen as suggestive of the continuing relevance of Halford Mackinder's "Heartland" concept if one accepts the popular view that it is the United States government who is behind all these transformations.

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate as to whether Mackinder's theories, after one hundred years, are to be taken seriously, or to be regarded with sober reservations. To do so, it would be appropriate to contrast his conceptions with those of other thinkers, as well as my own observations. Thus I first offer some reflections with respect to Mackinder's well-known formula on international politics, proceeding then to discuss how much emphasis we ought to place on geographical factors when dealing with strategic issues. Other sections will inquire into the land power-sea power debate, and discuss to what extent Mackinder's writings offer us a truly theoretical knowledge, given the fact that he is often included in the realist tradition within International Relations theory. This paper will argue, from that same realist theoretical position, that his writings are deeply flawed, and add nothing to our understanding of the international relations of contemporary Central Asia.

[5] When referring to an academic field of study, International Relations is written with capital letters, whereas as a social phenomenon, as real-world relations among nations, it is used with small letters.

The (In)Famous Formula

In his famous speech before the Royal Geographical Society, United Kingdom, on 25 January, 1904, and its subsequent publication in *The Geographical Journal*, Sir Halford Mackinder defined the distribution of power in the international system as follows: "The actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organization of the competing peoples… And the geographical quantities in the calculation are more measurable and more nearly constant than the human. Hence we should expect to find our formula apply equally to past history and to present politics…"[6] "My aim is … to make a geographical formula into which you could fit any political balance."[7]

Mackinder's use of words such as "at any given time" and "of course" makes one cautious in assenting to this "formula," especially if we consider, for example, Israel's strategic position. Neither the geographical conditions nor other factors do necessarily precondition Israel to pose as a preponderant power in the Middle East. Geographically, it has a very small population, territory, and hence lacks strategic depth, possesses very few strategically important endowments such as oil and gas, nor is it geographically insular like America. Had the Jewish state not enjoyed a close, yet informal, special relationship with Washington,[8] it would have been barely possible for it, surrounded as it is by arch-enemies who have posed an existential threat, to survive, let alone to be preeminent in the region.

[6] H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1904, p. 437.

[7] Ibid., p. 443, from Mackinder's response to his critics at the end of the discussion following his presentation of his thesis to the Royal Geographical Society.

[8] During the first years of its independence Israel's "protector" was Stalin's U.S.S.R., then France and the U.K., epitomized during the Suez War of 1956, and from the 1960s up until now—the U.S.

The "relative number, virility, equipment, and organization" of its people would have probably mattered little if Israel had attempted to struggle to survive on its own. The same can be said of the Baltic states which feel no less powerful than their giant neighbor to the east, due to their accession to NATO and newly established intimate relations with America.

Clearly, there is a contradiction in Mackinder's formula. He accurately points out that, unlike geographical factors, the human dimension is not a constant feature because the relative organization, virility and equipment of peoples are both difficult to measure and vary from time to time. At the same time, Mackinder strives to offer a "formula" that could be applied "equally to past history and to present politics." How one can devise a solid formula in the face of inconsistent factors leaves a big question mark hanging over the whole enterprise.[9]

Thucydides, the fifth century BC Greek historian widely regarded as a central reference point by realist thinkers, seemed to disapprove of all simple formulas. Human nature, internal structures of states (particularly, their political institutions), are equally, if not more, important in determining states' behavior, and thus geopolitical outcomes. Thucydides also demonstrated in his seminal *History of the Peloponnesian War* how such trivial events as the spread of epidemic among the population could exert an influence of the utmost importance.

The structure of the international system defined in terms of the distribution of power among states is one of the essential elements in a long list of significant factors. "The real cause," wrote Thucydides, "I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable."[10]

Distinction between democratic Athens and autocratic Sparta, and the overall impact that this had on the turn of events, prompted Thucydides to explore this factor at great length. Thus the amount of energy spent by him in enquiry into the form of government as one of the principal pillars supporting an historical conception, indicates how indispensable it is in shaping the course of events.

The character of people, underscored by Athenian daring and Spartan moderation as well as by the former's entrepreneurial and the latter's agrarian natures, was instrumental in determining how they acquired their empires and how this led to war between these two empires, Thucydides believed. For example, he tells how immediately after they had successfully resisted the Persian invasion, the Spartans decided to retire from the field instead of retaining their military-political presence in the liberated Greek states. This led the Athenians to be swift to fill the power vacuum and thus establish an extensive chain of dependencies, creating a powerful empire that quickly matched the power of the preponderant Lacedaemonian alliance led by Sparta. Had the characters of the Athenians and Spartans not been as they were, the three-decade-long destructive war would have probably not taken place, making the subsequent Hellenic degradation less likely.

Thucydides identified the "individual factor" as another determinant of international relations. "The influence of individual personalities on the course of the war [is remarkable] … the violent demagogue Cleon, the statesmanlike Pericles, the ambitious Alcibiades, the Athenian-like Hermocrates, and the overly pious Nicias" were subjected to intense scrutiny by Thucydides.[11] Had Alcibiades not

[9] This leads us to the dilemma of parsimony in theorizing, on the one hand, and of all-inclusiveness or eclecticism on the other. It can be argued that theoretical parsimony is often misleading, while eclecticism inhibits a cogent, theoretical, strategic thinking. It seems more desirable to me to be inclined to analyze every situation in its own right, rather than to be misled by parsimonious theories.

[10] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book I, Modern Library, New York, 1951, p. 24. Transl. by John Finley.

[11] L.M. Johnson-Bagby, "Fathers of International Relations? Thucydides As a Model for the Twenty First Century," in: L.S. Gustafson, *Thucydides' Theory of International Relations,* Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2000, p. 29.

led the already-winning Athenians on the ill-fated expedition against Syracuse (a democracy, incidentally), Athens would probably have emerged triumphant. This could have had enormous consequences for subsequent events such as the advent of Alexander and the Roman Empire, and hence the course taken by Western civilization. We would probably live in a totally different world today if, say, Pericles or Diodotius were in Alcibiades's place.

Singling out the geographical determinants as the principal factor, therefore, hardly seems appropriate. Wary of the perils of determinism, Thucydides proceeds from systemic-level causes (change in the balance of power in Greece with the ascendance of Athens), to domestic political factors, and further to individual-level constituents.

A similar study was undertaken by a contemporary scholar, Kenneth Waltz, in his 1959 book, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. Whereas Thucydides' is an essay where his theory is laid out by implication, Waltz's is an overt scientific explication, with the reverse order of elements: from individual-based component to the state factor up the ladder to international-systemic prism. Commenting on the human factor, Waltz makes the following conclusion that is valuable to our present discussion: "The assumption of a fixed human nature, in terms of which all else must be understood, itself helps to shift attention *away* from human nature—because human nature, by the terms of the assumption, cannot be changed, whereas social-political institutions can be."[12]

Whether human nature is constant or not is not a matter of discussion here; what is of use here is the possible replacement of the word "human nature" in this passage with "physical geography."

In Geography We Trust

Technology changes geography. The Persian Gulf is arguably as much a strategic backyard for the United States as Latin America is. Whereas the latter has been a backyard for almost two centuries, the former has become one in the last couple of decades. Latin America is a natural backyard for the northern giant purely for geographical reasons. The Persian Gulf, in contrast, is a backyard not because of geography but thanks to technology. Had the United States not enjoyed a global military-technological reach, the Persian Gulf would have never become an American backyard, to be defended jealously. Thanks to technological progress, the two Anglo-Saxon superpowers, Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first, have been *global* superpowers unlike the ones preceding them.

Because technology changes geography, the invention of intercontinental ballistic missiles led to the Soviet Union and the United States becoming virtual neighbors, although in strictly geographical terms, almost ten thousand miles separate the hearts of Russia and America. For technologically inferior Carthagenians, Rome was two thousand miles away, while for technology-focused Romans Carthage was less than four hundred miles from Rome. Another, though hypothetical, example of how technology changes geopolitical outcomes: if and when a substitute for oil is found, Azerbaijan would almost certainly cease to be a country suitable for U.S. national interests. So too, most probably, would Iran and the Persian Gulf, or Venezuela.[13]

[12] K.N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, p. 41. Emphasis in the original.

[13] Azerbaijan is vital to the U.S. not only in terms of economic interests, one could contend, but also for geopolitical reasons, in line with Mackinder, as an outpost from where Russia and Iran could be pressured. However, if that is the major concern for U.S. strategists, there are enough alternatives to Azerbaijan.

To be sure, technological progress is unlikely to provide significant reasons to necessitate substantially revising the art of conventional warfare with respect to military strategy.[14] Yet when it comes to understanding, explaining, and analyzing in the international strategic environment, taking the geographical factor for granted and as constant would almost certainly prove misleading. Geography, in grand strategic terms, is subject, therefore, to technological factors, and hence can hardly be counted as a permanent feature in the analysis of history and politics. Mackinder's conception, in contrast, takes geography as a primary factor determining the course of history. There is no doubt, of course, that geography has had a certain impact on political outcomes. However, as argued above, factors including personal ambitions and rivalries, the nature of government, economic interests, and even just misperception or foolishness, may be more important than geography.

Mackinder vs Mahan

The original "Pivot" paper of 1904 had stressed the strategic importance of land power, pointing to Russia as the key contender for the Pivot designation: "Russia replaces the Mongol Empire… She can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides, save the north. The full development of her ... railway mobility is merely a matter of time… The oversetting of the balance of power in favor 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."[15]

In his 1943 article for *Foreign Affairs*, however, Mackinder hinted at a revival of sea power, acknowledging, therefore, his "defeat" by Alfred Mahan, an advocate of thalassocracy. "My second geographical concept [the first being the "pivot" or the "heartland"] … [is] the Midland Ocean—the North Atlantic—and its dependent seas and river basins. …A bridgehead in France, a moated aerodrome in Britain, and a reserve of trained manpower, agriculture and industries in the eastern United States and Canada. So far as war-potential goes, both the United States and Canada are Atlantic countries, and since instant land-warfare is in view, both the bridgehead and the moated aerodrome are essential to amphibious power…"[16] "Sea power must in the final resort be amphibious if it is to balance land power."[17]

Colin Gray confesses that "Mackinder was wrong … since a maritime alliance overcame a continental alliance in the three great conflicts of the twentieth century."[18] Mackinder himself could not be sure at the time whether his thesis would ultimately trounce Mahan's. He could not know the future global military preeminence of the United States, which first and foremost was built upon the U.S. Navy's ability to wage a successful *sea-borne* air campaign anywhere in the world at any given time.[19] The British geographer was committing a fatal strategic blunder when he wrote that "no adequate proof

[14] Alfred Mahan's definition of strategy and tactics is instructive here. As long as one is in direct contact with the adversary on the battlefield, tactics are in play, according to him, whereas strategy is detached from direct contact. "Before hostile armies or fleets are brought into *contact* (a word which perhaps better than any other indicates the dividing line between tactics and strategy), there are a number of questions to be decided… All these are strategic questions…" (A.Th. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea-Power Upon History, 1660-1783,* Hill and Wang, New York, 1957. Original: 1890, p. 7). Emphasis in the original.

[15] H. Mackinder, op. cit., p. 436.

[16] H. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 4, July 1943, p. 604.

[17] Ibid., pp. 601-602.

[18] C.S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," p. 21.

[19] The twelve aircraft carriers owned by the United States guarantee the undisputed command of the world seas by America, which is the key element in her overall military-political preponderance in the world.

has yet been presented that air fighting will not follow the long history of all kinds of warfare by presenting alternations of offensive and defensive tactical superiority, meanwhile effecting few permanent changes in strategical conditions."[20]

It would be interesting to know whether Sir Halford, by switching his emphasis on to sea power, knew that he was implying that his theories were subject to chance and probability. After all, it was World War II, a "friction," to use Carl von Clausewitz's term, that Mackinder had not foreseen earlier, that made him adjust his original conceptions. True, he can scarcely be lambasted for being unable to foresee any turn of circumstances, nor is it fair to criticize his writings because they reflected their time. Yet, the claim to have found a "formula" is an extremely grand one, and it is a claim that must be tested vigorously.

Theory

Mackinder's writings are the first and the last of the great geopolitical theories, if we accept Gray's definition of a theory. Gray wrote that "although theorists' concepts frequently tell people what they know already, nonetheless they can perform a most valuable function helping organize, sort, and make sense of a messy reality,"[21] and Mackinder has for one hundred years scored highly on this. He offers a unique, insightful text that can help shape a strategically thinking mind. If one consults the *Oxford Reference Dictionary*, however, a somewhat different conclusion can be reached. Here, a theory is defined as "a supposition or system of ideas explaining something, especially one based on general principles independent of the particular things to be explained."[22] Mackinder's work, from this perspective, represents not a comprehensive theory, but policy-oriented prescriptions intended to "influence policy choice so that a geopolitical and geostrategic context unfavorable for Britain should not emerge. His theory contained a warning."[23] Eastern Europe and Central Asia seemed to be areas of great significance primarily because East-Central Europe was very likely to fall into the hands of Germany, the monster that British imperialism feared the most because the beast had already become the master of continental Europe. The other object of British concern was the bear further to the east of the monster—Russia. With Central Asia firmly secured by St. Petersburg, and the extensive railroad system under construction across the vast Eurasian landmass, British imperialism came to fear Russian imperialism, with an eye on India, as much as it did with regard to Germany flexing its muscles in Europe. Accordingly, the significance of the "pivot of history" seems to have been highly conditioned by circumstances and the overall balance of power.

It is conceivable that Mackinder's overall work may be regarded as a *historical* masterpiece that, in terms of temporal sweep and conceptual insight, has had very few (if any) competitors. Practically, however, nowadays Mackinder's "Heartland" is hardly a heartland. Had this concept been *theoretical*, and that theory had proved accurate, present-day Central Asia would have already become a hotspot of a fierce great-power geopolitical competition right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other regions of the globe, the Persian Gulf and East Asia to name but a few, score much higher in terms of significance in international politics.[24] Chris Seiple of the Institute for Global Engagement has struggled to be heard in urging the United States to pay closer attention to the "Heartland," especially

[20] H. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," p. 602.
[21] C.S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," p. 25.
[22] *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, ed. by J. Pearsall and B. Trumble, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 1496.
[23] C.S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," p. 22.
[24] See, for example: W. Cohen, *The Asian American Century,* Basic Books, New York, 2002.

Uzbekistan, only to find Washington distancing itself from that country as the time passes on. Central Asia is "a vital region that demands sustained engagement," argues Seiple. "Yet American foreign policy toward Uzbekistan has missed ... geostrategy."[25]

Mackinder and Realism

Geopolitics in general fits into the realm of classical realism within International Relations theory as developed in Western political science. So too does Mackinder, one of the founding fathers of geopolitics. His theories primarily deal with international conflict and the balance of power, with a highlight, of course, on geographical factors. He opined: "...the function of Britain and of Japan is to act upon the marginal region [around the Heartland], maintaining the balance of power there as against the expansive internal forces [of the Heartland]. I believe that the future of the world depends on the maintenance of this balance of power."[26]

Gray is quick to attack the liberals who condemn geopolitical study to have been obsessed with conflict; he argues "one might as well condemn medical research for its obsession with disease."[27] One might as well contend that medical research should be likened to peace studies in International Relations, not geopolitics, for the latter does not try to treat the "disease." The liberals are, of course, incorrect in accusing geopolitical study of inflaming conflict. Thus, while liberals' claim that international relations can be transformed benignly should be accepted with strong reservations, so should Gray's belief in the "eventual return of major conflicts."[28] To be sure, limited wars, between small powers, or major powers and small powers, have proved perpetual. Gray's dictum holds relatively true if he implies a future great-power cold war, short of a hot one because of the extensive nuclearization of major powers.[29]

There is little evidence to suggest that Mackinder's prescriptive theory represented a new conception for Britain's policymakers. Winston Churchill is noted for having asserted once that for four hundred years England's grand strategy had been to oppose the strongest power on the continent, and that that had nothing to do with rulers or nations—what mattered most was who was the most powerful.

Mackinder's theory resembles Waltz's in one important aspect: both are deterministic, one way or another. Waltz, in his most celebrated work, overemphasizes one dimension as having the most profound influence on states' behavior—the structure of the international system.[30] Mackinder, too, tends to downgrade other, sometimes more important, factors whilst stressing one constituent, geography. Nonetheless, Waltz's is a theoretical attempt to explain international relations, whereas Mackinder's is simply policy prescriptive.

Conclusion

Sir Halford Mackinder can be charged with an oversimplification of the way the world works, and his views of history and politics can be considered parochial. Like Karl Marx, whose philoso-

[25] Ch. Seiple, "Uzbekistan: The Civil Society in the Heartland," *Orbis*, Spring 2005, pp. 246-247.
[26] H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," p. 443.
[27] C.S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," p. 28.
[28] Ibid., p. 29.
[29] See: S. Sagan, K. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, 2nd edition, W.W. Norton, Baltimore, MD, 2001.
[30] See: K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1979.

phies suggested that the human society spins around economic interests and class struggle, Mackinder offers us a somewhat "deterministic" approach to international relations and history. He drew the attention of the Royal Geographical Society by asking them "to look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asiatic history, for European civilization is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion."[31] During the discussion following the speech, Spencer Wilkinson aptly raised the following objection: "...these great movements of Central Asian tribes on to Europe and on to the different marginal countries ... [are] over-estimated in their importance. They … very seldom represented any permanent alterations in the conditions of mankind; and they have been possible because the expanding forces of Central Asia hit upon a very much divided margin."[32]

The British geographer can be contrasted to Thucydides, who implied that a myriad number of factors can influence historical outcomes, or to Clausewitz, who introduced a concept of "friction" suggesting that chance and probability play not less significant a role in determining the outcomes of great events.

Mackinder's contribution to geography is, without doubt, immense. Yet his belief in the possibility of finding a notorious "formula" to understand, explain, and predict historical outcomes conditioned chiefly by geography, is little more than a great illusion. In the same fashion, one may speculate about the potential re-emergence of Central Asia as a spot of geopolitical significance for great powers. Only when China is powerful enough to challenge the predominant American power, may the "pivot of history" once again become an object of intense interest by extra-regional powers, namely the United States driven by a search for places from where it could deter the expansion of Chinese sphere of influence as well as to exert pressure on Beijing with the manipulation of Uighur and Tibetan separatism. To grasp this does not require familiarity with Mackinder; rather, common sense in political observation and historical knowledge would probably suffice. Major shifts in the global balance of power, with China or Russia as principal challengers, would be necessary for the "Heartland" to again really matter for great powers. Even then, it would hardly be as important a "prize" as, say, East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Persian Gulf. To be sure, "proclamation of the demise of geopolitics is at best premature," as Gray has put it. Mackinder should be read closely, if only in its own right and as a classical historical work. However, his central concept of "Heartland" should be approached with great caution, as it only hinders a clear understanding of Central Asia's international relations.

[31] H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," p. 423.
[32] Ibid., p. 438.