



## On Heartlands and Chessboards: Classical Geopolitics, Then and Now

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*Abstract: Every few years, scholars and strategists rediscover the importance of geography. Interest in the terrestrial setting of international politics has grown again in the last few years, with classical geopolitics, in particular, receiving a fresh look from a variety of angles. Scholars, journalists and strategists have abetted geography's "revenge" against perceptions of obsolescence in the face of changing technology.<sup>1</sup> This article discusses this most recent regeneration, evaluating the descriptive, predictive and prescriptive contributions of classical geopolitics, from Kjellen to Kaplan, in order to help determine whether the revival is to be welcomed.*

Geopolitics, or simply “the influence of geographical factors on political action” is, in some senses, as old as the study of politics itself.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, Plato and other ancients clearly understood that politics are shaped and constrained by nature.<sup>3</sup> But the modern age of geopolitics began just over a century ago, when Sir Halford Mackinder delivered his famous “pivot” address to the Royal

<sup>1</sup> In addition to those cited below, see Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012); Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); C. Dale Walton, *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Michael Lind, “A Neglected of American Tradition of Geopolitics?” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), pp. 181-195; Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Colin Dueck, “Geopolitics Reborn,” Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, July 2013, <https://www.fpri.org/articles/2013/07/geopolitics-reborn>.

<sup>2</sup> From Jean Gottman, “The Background of Geopolitics,” *Military Affairs*, Winter 1942, p. 197.

Society of Geographers in London. Few single lectures had as great an impact on the development of the study of international politics in the twentieth century. With one somewhat counter-intuitive, revolutionary idea, Mackinder put the study of geopolitics on the scholarly map, and in some ways injected maps themselves into the study of world politics. Scholars who have since worked in the geopolitical tradition hoped to explain states' behavior and destiny based upon their arrangement on the earth.

Mackinder is often considered to be the father of geopolitics, but he did not invent the tradition. The term predates his lecture by about five years. It was coined by Swedish geographer Rudolf Kjellen in 1899, and the first lengthy explorations of the subject were undertaken by Friedrich Ratzel.<sup>4</sup> Mackinder's ideas were largely a response to the geopolitical ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the patron saint of navies worldwide, who argued at the end of nineteenth century that control of the sea was the key to world domination.<sup>5</sup> Mackinder countered that the most important part of the world was instead on land, specifically in the center of what was soon to become the Soviet Union. Geographic constants would bless any power in control of this "heartland" with the most advantageous position from which to project power over the Eurasian landmass and, ultimately, the entire world. "The grouping of lands and seas, and of fertility and natural pathways," he wrote, "is such as to lend itself to the growth of empires, and in the end of a single world empire."<sup>6</sup> During the interwar years, Yale's Nicholas Spykman gave Mackinder's theories an American twist, arguing that the "rimland," or the Eurasian territory that surrounds the heartland, was, in fact, more crucial territory for the would-be imperialist.<sup>7</sup>

Other early scholarship focused not on territory *per se* but other aspects of the geographical milieu. Ellsworth Huntington examined the role that climate plays in development and conquest, arguing that great civilizations can only emerge in temperate zones because national expansion is to a large extent controlled and determined by climatic conditions.<sup>8</sup> He and other early international political geographers felt that there had to be a reason why the strongest states were found

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<sup>3</sup> Ladis K.D. Kristof, "The Origins and Evolution of Geopolitics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, March 1960, pp. 15-51.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1897). See also, Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment, on the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropo-Geography* (New York, NY: H. Holt and Co., 1911).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1918).

<sup>6</sup> Halford Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1943, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942) and *The Geography of the Peace* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1944).

<sup>8</sup> Ellsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1922, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

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