



The Roots of Mackinder's Geopolitics

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Abstract: Between 1904 and 1943, the British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder developed and refined his influential geopolitical view of global politics based on an understanding of history in its geographical setting. The roots of Mackinder's worldview reach back to a series of lesser-known writings that foreshadowed key aspects of his geopolitics, including the world as a "closed" political system; the relationship between physical and political geography; the recurring struggle between land powers and sea powers; great powers as "going concerns"; the effect of technology and scientific advances on the political cohesion of continental-sized states; and the impact of population and demographic trends on the global balance of power.

The great British geopolitical thinker Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) is known mostly for three works: "The Geographical Pivot of History" (1904), *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), and "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" (1943). In those writings, Mackinder developed, expanded and then refined his geopolitics, including the famous "Heartland" concept. He did so by brilliantly showing how geography has conditioned the behavior of states throughout world history.

The roots of Mackinder's geopolitics can be traced to some of his earlier, less well-known writings in which he first explored the causal connection between geography and the course of world events. To fully understand Mackinder's geopolitical ideas, it is helpful to look at the intellectual seeds from which they sprouted.

In 1887, Mackinder delivered a paper entitled "The Scope and Methods of Geography" to a gathering of the Royal Geographical Society that was subsequently published in the Society's *Proceedings*. He began the paper by noting that the exploration of the world was nearing its end. "[W]e are now near the end of the roll

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of great discoveries,” he wrote—a remark that foreshadowed his later analysis in “The Geographical Pivot of History” that the end of the age of exploration (the “Columbian epoch”) produced a “closed” political system. He hastened to add in his 1887 paper that this did not mean that the geographer’s work was finished. “Our future work,” he explained, is to focus on the relation of history and geography. This meant that geographers must no longer treat physical geography as separate from political geography. “The function of political geography,” he wrote, “is to trace the interaction between man and his environment.” Indeed, “no rational political geography,” he continued, “can exist which is not built upon and subsequent to physical geography.” Geography’s main function, therefore, is to “trace causal relations” between geography and history.



Sir Halford Mackinder

Mackinder conceded that it was important to learn the “physical features,” but they must be learned, he explained, “in their causal relations.” When geography is approached in that manner, “[n]ew facts fit in an orderly way into the general scheme. They throw a new light on to all previously obtained knowledge, and that knowledge in turn illuminates them from many points.” In other words, understanding geographical causation in history will help us better understand the past.

It will also, according to Mackinder, help us understand current world events and predict future events and trends around the globe. “[T]he geographer,” he noted, “looks at the past that he may interpret the present.” “The mind which has vividly grasped in their true relations the factors of the environment,” he wrote further, “is likely to be fertile in the suggestion of new relations between the environment and man.”

“True physical geography,” Mackinder wrote, “aims at giving us a causal description of the distribution of the features of the earth’s surface.” The political geographer, he continued, attempts to answer the question: How does physical

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