



Mackinder's Geopolitical Perspective Revisited

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Abstract: This article explores three themes related to classical geopolitics: first, it presents reasons why scholars and commentators abandoned geopolitical analysis after World War II, and then reengaged with geopolitical factors after the Soviet Union's collapse; second, it suggests how Mackinder's geopolitical concept of the heartland illuminates the strategic goals of Russia and China, the leading powers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; and, third, it introduces utility of classical geopolitical thought for how the United States might respond to the potential domination of Mackinder's heartland by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

During the second half of the twentieth century, classical geopolitics fell into disrepute among scholars and pundits in the West. Immediately after World War II, geopolitical thought became closely identified in the public mind with the Nazi program of ethnic cleansing, the Holocaust, and the attempt at European domination. Classical geopolitical ideas, first advanced by Halford J. Mackinder,¹ a Briton, were appropriated by Nazi thinkers² and, in the process, the ideals of the Anglo-American classical geopolitical thinkers were turned on their head in order to justify European conquest.³ Through the fall of the Soviet Union, “geopolitics” was tainted by the connection to the ideology of the Nazis.

¹ Halford J. Mackinder, in Anthony J. Pearce, ed., *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962 [1942 for printing of this collection, 1919 for original publication]).

² For the major German geopolitical thinkers, see Andreas Dorplan, *The World of General Haushofer* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1942); Hans W. Weigert, *Generals and Geographers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942); and Derwent Whittlesey, *German Strategy for World Conquest* (London: F.E. Robinson, 1943).

³ Nevertheless, articles appeared in weekly magazines defending the necessity of thinking geopolitically about international relations. See Joseph J. Thorndike, Jr., “Geopolitics: The Lurid Career of a Scientific System which a Briton Invented, the Germans Used, and Americans Need to Study,” *Life*, Dec. 21, 1942, pp. 106-112, https://books.google.com/books?id=NVEEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#

After World War II, as the United States and the Soviet Union entered into the nuclear arms race and established a balance of nuclear terror (“Mutual Assured Destruction” or MAD), William Liscum Borden thought that the compression of time (with ICBM delivery systems) vitiated the need for attention to geographic factors.⁴ The dramatic decreases in the cost of airborne transportation for both goods and people reinforced the notion—especially among global elites—that technological change rendered geography irrelevant.⁵ More recently, the instantaneous transmission of information resulting from the rapid diffusion of the internet once again seemed to obliterate geographic factors in explaining and predicting international conflict. Despite these developments, there have always been dissenters. In 1965, George Etzel Percy, the Geographer at the Department of State reminded the policy elite that the distance from the United States to South Vietnam, the local cover provided by jungles and the rainy season for the insurgents, and the opposition to the regime in Saigon by the Viet Cong, all conspired, in his estimation, to reduce the likelihood of securing a military victory.⁶ And, in 2014, Chris Parry, a retired Admiral of the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom highlighted the importance of maritime transport—as distinct from communication—and the associated chokepoints for the movement of those goods on which economic globalization depends.⁷

Attacks were also launched on geopolitics more generally from the academy. Left wing, so-called “critical” intellectuals deployed an impenetrable jargon to “unmask” (i.e., reveal) power relationships and their justifications in classical geopolitical thinking.⁸ Classical geopolitical thinkers were accused of having hidden their prejudices and ideological commitments favoring imperialism behind a smokescreen of “objective” observations.⁹ Curiously, Halford J. Mackinder, arguably

[v=onepage&q&f=false](#); and Robert Strausz-Hupé, “It’s Smart to be Geopolitical,” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Feb. 6, 1943, pp. 4-5, 20-21, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1943feb06-00004?View=PDF>. For a recent treatment, see Geoffrey Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 114-151.

⁴ For instance, see William Liscum Borden, *There Will Be No Time, The Revolution in Strategy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946).

⁵ Christopher J. Fettweis in “Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century,” *Parameters*, Summer 2000, pp. 58-71, <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/00summer/fettweis.htm>.

⁶ George Etzel Percy, “Geographic Aspects of the Struggle in Viet-Nam,” *The Department of State Bulletin*, Sept. 20, 1965, pp. 487-496, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c022409602;view=1up;seq=491>.

⁷ Chris Parry, *Super Highway: Sea Power in the 21st Century* (London: Elliot and Thompson Limited, 2014), pp. 35-42.

⁸ See Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 145-209. For comments on Collin’s brilliant essays, see Leonard Hochberg, “The Language of National Insecurity: Prediction, Strategy, and Geopolitics,” *Advances in Competitiveness Research*, 2002, <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-141841471/the-language-of-national-insecurity-prediction-strategy>.

⁹ For instance, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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