The Ghost of the Heartland

Sir Halford Mackinder and the Balance of Power in Eurasia

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Russia's war in Ukraine has revived discussions on the geopolitical future of Eurasia. The unpredictable evolution of the conflict and the crisis of Moscow's regional sphere of influence pose serious questions about the balance of power in the vast continental landmass between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The name of Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947) pops up frequently in the debate: His idea of the Eurasian "heartland" as the "pivot region" of world politics (Mackinder 1904, 434), whose control can lead to global domination, remains very popular among international strategy experts and geopolitical pundits. Some even see the current Ukraine crisis as part of the "script" written by Mackinder more than a century ago, showing the irreversible decline of the maritime West in front of the continental alliance between Russia and China (Krikke 2022). Yet such appreciation is not uncontested. Academic geographers point out the limited

usefulness of Mackinder's concept for contemporary issues, warning that it represents "a West-centric understanding of history" (Dittmer 2013) largely oblivious to social, cultural and political changes. It is, for example, a "poor tool" to understand the role of China in Asia (Lasserre 2020) and the complex web of political and economic relations created by the country's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Far from being a perceptive reading of immutable geographical elements, it is a "dangerous, deterministic prediction" (De Blij 1973, 289) that is used to justify military interventions and aggressive policies for the control of the Eurasian landmass.

So how should we consider Mackinder's work? Is it still a valuable interpretative scheme for our turbulent times? Or is it instead irretrievably dated and dangerously misread by contemporary analysts? The answers to these questions require a careful look at Mackinder's life and the historical context in which the "heartland" theory came to light in the early 20th century.

The theory was more the product of precise political and cultural conditions than a timeless stroke of geographical genius, posing its author in direct (and sometimes polemical) debate with other strategic and geographical thinkers of the Edwardian era. Such a debate can still be perceived today in Mackinder's key texts and helps to explain the peculiarities and contradictions of his great idea. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the constant revision and reinterpretation of the "heartland" theory by various authors during and after the Cold War. Through the course of the last century, Mackinder's concept has in fact become the basis of several ideological visions and political programmes, losing many of its original components and developing new features that were later arbitrarily attributed to its creator. Only at the end of these two processes – exploration of the original historical context and analysis of the intellectual evolution of the "heartland" theory – is it possible to draw some relevant conclusions on Mackinder's legacy and its utility for the discussion of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics.

Mackinder's anxious vision

Halford Mackinder was not a man out of his time. The son of a rural doctor, he tried to find his place in the complex social environment of late Victorian Britain. After graduating from Oxford in 1880, he decided to become a university lecturer,

seeing it as the first step of a promising academic career. Mackinder focused his energies mostly on geography, which was at the time the subject of an intense public campaign promoted by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) (Wise 1986, 367-82). The campaign aimed to improve the teaching of geography in schools and universities, replacing obsolete practices with the new scientific methods developed in France and Germany. Thanks to his contacts with the RGS, Mackinder came to see geography as a crucial discipline for his country, providing it with "an accurate appreciation of space-relations in history" (Mackinder 1895, 379) and contributing to the preservation of its global empire against old and new rivals.

This last aspect was crucial for him. Concerned by the relative economic and military decline of Britain in the late 19th century, Mackinder believed that his country was soon to be confronted by new continental states like Germany or the United States that could use the "rapidly developing resources" of their "vast territories" to build large fleets and defeat the Royal Navy (Mackinder 1903). This threat could only be averted by the union of Britain with its white settler colonies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa), but such an ambitious project required a proper appreciation of world geographical realities. Every British subject should then train to become an "ideal geographer" capable of analysing different environments and picturing "the movements of communities driven by their past history." Thanks to these formidable skills, "a merchant, soldier, or politician" would be ready to face "practical space-problems" and take the right measures to maintain Britain's global hegemony (Mackinder 1895, 376). In Mackinder's view, geographical education was a patriotic duty, and it should be pursued with the utmost urgency for the greater benefit of the nation. Despite his best efforts, however, the discipline struggled to gain a stable position in British universities, while its use for practical matters of state continued to be rather occasional. What was needed was something that could stimulate the imagination of the British ruling class and convince it of the exceptional value of geography as an instrument of statecraft. After some reflection, Mackinder thought to have finally found such a stimulating element with his paper "The Geographical Pivot of History," which he proudly presented at the RGS in January 1904.

On the surface, the paper was not particularly original. It reflected the European "geopolitical panic" of the early 20th century and was based on popular

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notions of national decline and violent competition between great states for global domination (Heffernan 2000, 27–51). It was also heavily influenced by J.R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883), which was a key text for the movement campaigning for the unification of Britain with its white colonies. Yet, through rhetoric and imagination, Mackinder was able to convey a strong personal interpretation of modern world history and the complex relationship between space and humanity.

According to his view, Western European countries had discovered and colonised large parts of the world for centuries thanks to their successful use of sea communications. But the long maritime era opened by Christopher Columbus's voyages was now ending and the world was becoming a "dangerous closed political system" where weak nations were at risk of being crushed by stronger ones (Mackinder 1904, 422). This trend was also accompanied by the return of the Eurasian landmass at the centre of the global system, due to the development of transcontinental railways in the steppes of Russia and Central Asia. These railways created the conditions for the rise of a vast and self-sufficient economic zone, free from the interference of Western sea powers. It was the "pivot's region of world history" from which all the great nomadic peoples of the past (Huns, Mongols, Turks) had moved to conquer large swathes of Europe and East Asia (Mackinder 1904, 436). Now this "pivot region" was under the control of Tsarist Russia, which aimed to use it as a base from which to extend its power over Scandinavia, Central Europe, Persia, India, and China. Modern railway mobility favoured Russian imperial ambitions, while the inability to project sea power in the Eurasian pivot area marked the relative decline of the West in the post–Columbian age. Yet Western nations could still thwart Russia's expansion through military alliances and the use of peninsulas like India or Korea as "bridge heads" for attacks against the pivot area. Despite its new strength, Russia remained vulnerable to the actions of the "surrounding and insular powers," proving the persistence of essential geographical conditions. Therefore, Mackinder closed his long paper

with a reminder of the vital importance of geography for international affairs. Geography was the key to understand "the actual balance of political power" in the world and its future evolution (Mackinder 1904, 436-7).

Criticism and revision

Despite its imaginative boldness, Mackinder's great geopolitical picture failed to impress the British establishment. In part, his core argument was weakened by Russia's catastrophic defeat in the war against Japan (1904-5), which seemed to show the military limits of transcontinental railways and the persistent superiority of sea power nations over continental empires. But some commentators also questioned the soundness of his reasoning: An anonymous reviewer on *The Spectator*, for example, noted that Northern Asia remained underdeveloped, and Russia had not enough strength to exploit efficiently its resources. Moreover, railways were still more expensive than sea communications, and no "multiplication" of them could reduce the long distances separating Europe from Asia. For these reasons, Mackinder's paper was more a "political prophecy" than a serious strategic analysis, and it did not deserve any special consideration (Anonymous 1904). At the same time, the presence of more popular publications on the "Russian threat" – like those of George Curzon (1859-1925) – obscured Mackinder's work and prevented it from reaching a wider audience. His voice was just one among many who discussed regularly the imperial rivalries for the control of Eastern Asia or the long "Great Game" with Russia over India. It did not get the spotlight it originally sought.

Yet Mackinder did not drop his great vision and continued to work on it in the following years, trying to address both the criticism received and the constant evolution of international conditions. The outbreak of World War I impressed a great acceleration to this revisionist work and led to significant changes in the geographical definition of the "pivot region." Indeed, in the 1904 paper, this area had been mainly Asiatic, centering on Siberia and its immediate surroundings, while now its borders began to move steadily toward the West and include a huge chunk of Eastern Europe. Such a change was the product of Mackinder's involvement in the struggle for the liberation of Austria-Hungary's small nationalities, which was energetically promoted in Britain by the New Europe group led by Robert

Seton-Watson (Seton-Watson 1981). As a member of the group, Mackinder became convinced of the large artificiality of "present political frontiers" in Eastern Europe and advocated a vast federal reorganisation of the region as an obstacle to the hegemonic ambitions of Germany. The war was also a contest between "imperial centralisation and clustered nationalities," where the latter ones were destined to play a central role in the future global order (Mackinder 1915). British and Allied soldiers were dying not only to "preserve their own country" but also to "organize for the first time a whole democratic world," free from the political and social constraints of the past (Mackinder 1917, 151). Therefore, it was essential, for both idealistic and pragmatic reasons, that Eastern Europeans should be supported in their quest for freedom and independence. This support became more imperative in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, when the defeat of Germany, the collapse of Austria–Hungary, and the revolutionary turmoil in Russia posed enormous diplomatic challenges for the Allied powers and threatened to generate a new wave of instability across the European continent. Hoping to influence the workings of the Paris Peace Conference, Mackinder wrote *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), in which he tried to reconcile the democratic spirit of the time with the lasting realities of geography, sketching a feasible and realistic settlement for the post-war world.

The book warned against the risks of "generous visions" in a world dominated by material needs and brutal "organisers," who had no trouble squashing freedom to pursue their political objectives (Mackinder 1919, 6–7). To survive in such a hostile environment, democracies should learn to use geography as a guide to face the new problems created by the war. Geographical features had not changed through time and remained an essential point of reference for the work of strategists and policymakers. The most significant of these features was the territorial unity of Europe, Asia, and Africa, which formed a massive "World–Island" at the core of the global system (Mackinder 1919, 96). The "heartland" of

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this huge continental landmass was the original "pivot region" of 1904, extending now from Siberia to Eastern Europe and including all the new countries born by the dissolution of Austria–Hungary and Tsarist Russia during the war. If Western democracies wished to build a peaceful future, they had to preserve the balance of power in the "world–island" and avoid the control of the "heartland" by a single power or a combination of countries. The formula for international security was simple: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World–Island: Who rules the World–Island commands the World." (Mackinder 1919, 194). Western countries should then support Eastern European peoples and build with them a strategic barrier between Germany and Soviet Russia, preserving the post–war international order from any revisionist threat. With time and assistance, new states like Poland or Czechoslovakia could become solid pillars of the post–war global system and help to defend peace and democracy in Europe and other parts of the "world–island."

Mackinder's view was partly idealistic but tempered by his belief in the unchangeability of geographical factors and by his concern about the future of the British Empire after the war. In this sense, he thought that the collapse of Russia represented a serious threat for British interests in the East and that imperial authorities needed to fight harder against the rising menace of Bolshevism. In late 1919, his ideas caught the attention of fellow countryman George Curzon, then Britain's secretary of state for foreign affairs, who appointed Mackinder as British High Commissioner to South Russia in order to revitalise the dwindling forces of General Denikin's Volunteer Army and create a potential anti–Bolshevik alliance in Eastern Europe. Despite some promising overtures by Poland, however, Mackinder's mission was a complete failure and destroyed any possibility that his geopolitical vision could become a leading force of British foreign policy (Pelizza 2016, 174-95). Yet the "heartland" concept survived and gave birth to new variations of its creator's original ideas, setting the ground for the current frenzy about Mackinderian geopolitics.

Reinventing the 'heartland'

While largely ignored in Britain, Mackinder's ideas found an unexpected fortune in Germany where they contributed to the development of Karl Haushofer's *Geopolitik* during the 1920s (Herwig 1999, 218-41).

A former military officer with strong ties to right-wing groups, including the Nazis, Haushofer was deeply impressed by the "heartland" concept and started to fantasize about the creation of a vast "Pan-Eurasian bloc" led by Germany and Russia (Herwig 2016, 124). This bloc would exploit the natural resources of the "heartland" and challenge Western sea power, shaping a new world order free from the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon countries. It was a complete reversal of Mackinder's original vision: The threat against which the British geographer had warned became a desired outcome for his German counterpart.

In the 1930s Haushofer's ideas seemed to be officially endorsed by the Nazi regime, thanks also to the close connection of his son Albrecht with the Foreign Ministry. Thus, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed their infamous non-aggression pact in 1939, dividing Eastern Europe between themselves, many believed that Mackinder had somehow inspired that event, providing an intellectual blueprint to Hitler's expansionism. The American press was especially struck by this "scandalous" association and published sensationalist articles on how Mackinder's work had directly influenced Hitler and the whole Nazi war strategy (Blouet 1987, 191-2). Of course, Mackinder tried to set the record straight, emphasizing the differences between his ideas and those of Haushofer, but these efforts were not entirely successful and helped to spread further the rough version of his geopolitical concepts presented by the papers. The "heartland" started to live a life of its own, though its name continued to be associated to Mackinder.

In the United States it almost became an intellectual fad, stimulating the reflection of influential scholars like Owen Lattimore and Nicholas J. Spykman. The concept was rarely understood in its original terms and served mainly to validate previously held beliefs, shaping different theories about the new global order created by the war. Lattimore, for example, observed that the frontiers of internal Asia were now "clearly dominated by the Soviet Union," which used this position of strength to spread communist ideas across the continent. The West should

counter such dangerous influence through political propaganda and effective economic assistance to local peoples (Lattimore 1953, 28-30). On the other hand, Spykman claimed that the peripheral areas around the core of Eurasia – the so-called "rimland" – were far more important than the "heartland" for the international balance of power. Indeed, these areas could be militarily fortified and transformed into "a vast buffer zone" against continental empires like the Soviet Union, emphasizing the amphibious power of the United States and its allies. Mackinder's famous dictum was significantly altered: "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." (Spykman 1944, 38-43). Thanks to Spykman's reinterpretation, Mackinder's geopolitical ideas entered the strategic debates of the Cold War and influenced to a certain extent the "containment" policies of the United States. Therefore, after his death in 1947, Mackinder became "a strategist without a place or context," whose key tenets – extrapolated from their original form – were frequently used by security experts to justify their own theories and catch the eyes of policymakers (Ó Tuathail 1992, 116). The historical complexity of his thought was lost and replaced by simplistic visions rooted in geographical determinism and political expediency. Yet his name remained as an approving "brand" to market geopolitical speculations, while the "heartland" dictum became a stylish slogan easy to remember and widely quotable by the media.

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Victorian prophecies and 21st-century realities

The end of the Cold War put another spin on Mackinder's legacy. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of new independent states across Eurasia gave new popularity to his ideas, inspiring further variations and reinterpretations of the original "heartland" formula. In Russia, for example, the "heartland" was discovered by several intellectuals and became a recurring feature in the fierce debates about the future of the country after the Soviet collapse. Both

traditionalists and neo-Eurasianists praised Mackinder's strategic intuitions and made them the basis of various geopolitical schemes aimed at restoring Moscow as a great global power (Hauner 2013, 123-38). But it was not only Russia that fell in love with Mackinder. Other post-Soviet states – Uzbekistan, for one – were also attracted by his writings to sketch their foreign policies after independence (Sharapova 2013, 171-95), while the "heartland" concept continued to be seen in the West as a simple and effective lens to read the confusing geopolitical reality of Eurasia. This popularity has persisted to these days and, as noticed in the opening part of this article, has gained even further relevance after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

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Yet it should be remembered that Mackinder's great geopolitical picture of Eurasia was the product of a precise historical context. This limits its usefulness to understand and interpret current events. Mackinder's view, for example, is still dominated by railways, heavy industries, large armies, and other early 20th-century ideas of national power, while today such notion is much more nuanced and shaped by complex factors like technological progress, international connectivity, and economic innovation. At present, these factors tend to favour more Western countries than the Russian "heartland" state (Lewis 2022). China's role in Eurasia is also complicated and seems to escape the rigid geo-historical scheme depicted in Mackinder's writings. According to Lasserre (2020), for example, the BRI is mainly "an opportunistic development strategy" dictated by various imperatives, and it is quite hard to see it as a new incarnation of the "heartland" prophecy. Finally, small states are often neglected in Mackinder's reflection, while the war in Ukraine has shown how they can successfully resist the pressures of great powers and defend actively their independence on the world stage. Therefore, scholars and analysts should be wary of relying on antiquated models to explain the complicated reality of the 21st century.

Nevertheless, the incredible vitality of Mackinder's vision, constantly reinvented in different national contexts, is a testament to its author's brilliant imagination and to the persistent anxiety toward the fate of the Eurasian region, which remains subject to intense strategic competition and great geopolitical changes. We do not need to follow Mackinder's old-fashioned logic till the end to recognize the relevance of his words to contemporary strategists and policymakers. Indeed, their concerns are often similar to those tackled by the British geographer one century ago. Far from being exorcised, the "ghost of the heartland" still haunts us in unexpected ways.

About the author

Simone Pelizza studied history at the Catholic University of Milan, and at the University of Leeds, where he earned his Ph.D. in 2013 with a dissertation on the life and thought of Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), the father of modern geopolitics. Pelizza has published book reviews and articles in several academic journals. Since 2014, he has served as author and editor at *Il Caffè Geopolitico*, an Italian website devoted to geopolitics and international affairs. In such a capacity he has also contributed to lectures and educational courses on these topics. His main research interests are international history, international relations, Russian and Asian geopolitics. He lives and works in the United Kingdom.

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