“The Geographical Pivot of History”: A Critical Reading

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In Hérodote 2012/3 No 146-147 , pages 139 to 158
Publisher La Découverte

ISSN 0338-487X
ISBN 9782707174512
DOI 10.3917/her.146.0139
Uploaded: 09/10/2013

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Abstract

This article is a precise and critical analysis of Mackinder’s famed 1904 article “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Even though he never used the term *geopolitics*, Mackinder is still considered to be its founder. This is why an analysis of his article is in order. The article’s renown rests on the use of the term *heartland*, considered today to be the central concept of Mackinder’s theory. It evokes a region that is the *heart* of the territory of a nation, but further in the text also takes the meaning of “central region,” associated with the idea of Eurasia and a much vaster expanse of land than that of heartland. The second term that is considered the other major concept of Mackinder’s theory is that of pivot. But this term poses a problem when applied to the immense plains of Eurasia, because these cannot logically be considered as pivots. To explain the power of the Russian Empire, Mackinder gives more importance to a fundamental aspect of geology and physical geography—the extent of the Eurasian plate. He tends to minimize the role of the political and military structures that rendered possible the conquest and control of this immense territory for more than three centuries, all the while trying to extend it even more. Mackinder’s thesis is therefore strictly determinist and fairly rudimentary.

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

The French school of geopolitics, as it has expressed itself for thirty years under the auspices of the symbolic character of Herodotus, the first historian and geographer, combines the reasoning of history and geography, or to speak more majestically, History and Geography. Therefore the (overly) famous title of Sir Halford Mackinder’s article “The Geographical Pivot of History” should have filled us with delight, despite its enigmatic—to say the least—aspect (all excerpts here are taken from the text of this 1904 lecture at the Royal Geographical Society of London, unless otherwise noted). The idea that History (as a whole?) can gravitate around

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a geographical "pivot" is a notion that can soothe the inferiority complex of many geographers when faced with the media success of so many historians! Since geopolitics has become a subject taught in business schools as it is at the War College (which has regained its denomination of yesteryear), Mackinder is ritually considered to be it's founder, even though he dismissed this term. In Anglo-Saxon countries where one does not speak of geopolitics but of "international relations" (International studies developed in American universities especially after the 1919 establishment of the League of Nations), the foundational role of Mackinder's contentions is still invoked, including in the press and at the White House. This is also the case in *La géopolitique pour les nuls*, an honest work published by Philippe Moreau Defarges who, for twenty-five years, has mostly written works on "international relations."

Since *Hérodote* was established (1976), we have hardly mentioned Mackinder's ideas. But now that geopolitics is mentioned more and more in the teaching of history and geography—which is very fortunate—it has become necessary to publish an in-depth analysis of the article "The Geographical Pivot of History."

I have retained extracts of unequal length that progressively express the significant steps of Mackinder's argument, up until those that ultimately became famous. For each of these steps, which I regrouped into several parts (Mackinder's article does not include subheads), I have added commentary and supplementary information because, as we shall see, even when Mackinder solemnly appeals to History, he approves of historical reasoning that is at the very least rudimentary.

As his lecture progresses, I will therefore propose more complex explanations that do not, however, contradict the essence of his thesis. This thesis is, moreover, not really formulated until the last two pages of his article. Before this, Mackinder devotes long, uninteresting passages to listing a series of ancient historic events that succeeded one another throughout Europe, or to the consideration of different climate zones in Eurasia. I have not reproduced these passages, but instead briefly indicated their content. In contrast, I retained the essence of the article's first two pages, for the purposes of understanding their rather solemn tone.

> When historians in the remote future come to look back on the group of centuries through which we are now passing, and see them foreshortened, as we to-day see the Egyptian dynasties, it may well be that they will describe the last 400 years as the Columbian epoch, and will say that it ended soon after the year 1900. . . [G]eography must be diverted to the purpose of intensive survey and philosophic synthesis. . . . It appears to me, therefore, that in the present decade we are for the first time in a position to attempt, with some degree of completeness, a correlation between the larger geographical and the larger historical generalizations. For the first time we can perceive something of the real proportion of features and events on the stage of the

> whole world, and may seek a formula which shall express certain aspects, at any rate, of geographical causation in universal history. If we are fortunate, that formula should have a practical value as setting into perspective some of the competing forces in current international politics. The familiar phrase about the westward march of empire is an empirical and fragmentary attempt of the kind. I propose this evening describing those physical features of the world which I believe to have been most coercive of human action, and presenting some of the chief phases of history as organically connected with them, even in the ages when they were unknown to geography. My aim will not be to discuss the influence of this or that kind of feature, or yet to make a study in regional geography, but rather to exhibit human history as part of the life of the world organism. I recognize that I can only arrive at one aspect of the truth, and I have no wish to stray into excessive materialism. Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls. My concern is with the general physical control, rather than the causes of universal history. It is obvious that only a first approximation to truth can be hoped for, I shall be humble to my critics. (421)

> The most remarkable contrast in the political map of modern Europe is that presented by the vast area of Russia occupying half the Continent and the group of smaller territories tenanted by the Western Powers. From a physical point of view, there is, of course, a like contrast between the unbroken lowland of the east and the rich complex of mountains and valleys, islands and peninsulas, which together form the remainder of this part of the world. At first sight it would appear that in these familiar facts we have a correlation between natural environment and political organization so obvious as hardly to be worthy of description, especially when we note that throughout the Russian plain a cold winter is opposed to a hot summer, and the conditions of human existence thus rendered additionally uniform. Yet a series of historical maps, such as that contained in the *Oxford Atlas*, will reveal the fact that not merely is the rough coincidence of European Russia with the Eastern Plain of Europe a matter of the last hundred years or so, but that in all earlier time there was persistent re-assertion of quite another tendency in the political grouping. (423)

The fourth page is a description of the biogeographic zones that extend from the "European isthmus of the Baltic to the Black Sea" to eastern Siberia. Mackinder, however, has not yet mentioned the purpose of this introduction of natural data: to the north the great forest, and then to the south the "steppe" zone (steppe in the Russian sense, that is to say what in North America is called "prairie") of which the grass cover is more or less dense, and still farther south, between the Caspian and the Aral sea, the arid steppes with sparse vegetation that turn into desert. It should be noted that Mackinder does not mention the existence of the large mountain ranges that limit the steppe zone toward the south. He pays almost exclusive attention to

these steppes without actually noting that they extend from east to west, for the most part on a vast range of large plains and plateaus. Today geologists call this the Eurasian plate, and from the end of the nineteenth century specialists knew the unity of this geological area due to the success of *The Face of the Earth*, the book by Austrian geologist Eduard Suess.

The Mongol Invasions

> The earlier Russia and Poland were established wholly in the glades of the forest. Through the steppe on the other hand there came from the unknown recesses of Asia by the gateway between the Ural mountains and the Caspian sea, in all the centuries from the fifth to the sixteenth, a remarkable succession of Turanian nomadic peoples—Huns, Avars, Bulgarians, Magyars, Khazars, Patzinaks, Comans, Mongols, Kalmuks . . .
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> Such was the harvest of results produced by a cloud of ruthless and idealess horsemen sweeping over the unimpeded plain—a blow, as it were, from the great Asiatic hammer striking freely through the vacant space. . . . The northern forests of Russia were held tributary to the Mongol Khans of Kipchak, or "the Steppe," and Russian development was thus delayed . . . at a time when the remainder of Europe was rapidly advancing. (427)

Mackinder adds to the list of these invasions those of the Vikings or Varangians, from the Baltic toward Byzantium and the Black Sea: "A rival mobility of power was that of the Vikings in their boats. Descending from Scandinavia both upon the northern and the southern shores of Europe, they penetrated inland by the river ways" (427). But Mackinder does not mention these Varangians' creation of the city of Kiev on the Dnieper, the Christian capital of the first Russian state (or rather of Rus), nor its destruction by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, after which the survivors took refuge in the forests to the north, in the clearing of Moscow.

Mackinder enumerates these invasions at length, but does not inquire into why they were unstoppable. It must be noted that these grassy plains that were periodically ravaged were sparsely populated. We should also keep in mind that these Mongol horsemen each had use of at least one horse, whereas in the west at that time, horses were the privilege of "knights." Not only was it then the war machine par excellence, but, at least since Attila's Huns in the fifth century, the Mongol horses were the first to be equipped with "horseshoes" that allowed them to cover much greater distances than unshod horses such as those of the Romans and later

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

the Europeans during much of the Middle Ages. The horseshoe, according to current Turkish historians, was invented by Mongol metallurgists from the forested regions near. In addition, the stirrup, another Turkic-Mongol invention, permitted Mongol fighters to shoot arrows while galloping.

Some Mongol tribal leaders also had the ability to conceptualize immense spaces and to rapidly deploy large numbers of riders in order to operate large-scale maneuvers. These leaders came from different tribes between which rivalries traditionally existed. To unite and maneuver so many horse riders, the rivalries had to be overcome. This implies the emergence of a leader accepted by all, which can happen only from time to time because of certain genealogical combinations. The stages of decline of the Mongol Empires correspond with the reappearance of tribal rivalries stirred up after the death of the emperor by the competition of his sons, who were related to the different tribes of their mothers.

It must be noted that these Mongol (or rather Turkic-Mongol) invasions did not have the purpose only of plundering, as Mackinder repeats, but also the growth of huge state systems, which he hardly mentions. Thus, in the empire of Genghis Khan that extended from the plains of present-day Hungary to Vietnam, orders and news spread in a surprisingly rapid and consistent fashion, through the use of a post relay system that we now know was another Mongol invention. These Mongol state systems were capable of conquering not only vast, underpopulated areas, but also the huge populations of China because they knew how to rely on the traditional Chinese administration.

The category of Mongol, which today we call Turkic-Mongol, is above all linguistic. We call Turks the Turkic-Mongol populations who became Muslim, while those who are Buddhist or still practice shamanism are called Mongols.

> The full meaning of Asiatic influence upon Europe is not, however, discernible until we come to the Mongol invasions of the fifteenth century; but before we analyze the essential facts concerning these, it is desirable to shift our geographical view-point from Europe, so that we may consider the Old World in its entirety . . . (428). In Europe, Western Siberia, and Western Turkestan the steppe lands lie low, in some places below the level of the sea. Further to east, in Mongolia, they extend over plateaux; but the passage from the one level to the other, over the naked, unscarped lower ranges of the arid heart-land, presents little difficulty. (430)

It is rather surprising to see in this passage, without any definition or explanation, the term *heartland* that is considered today to be the key concept of Mackinder's theory. But the word has a deep sentimental connotation (notably in contemporary U.S. advertising), designating a region that is the *heart* of a nation's territory, a bit like Île-de-France in France, or Moscow in Russia.

> The hordes which ultimately fell upon Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century gathered their first force 3000 miles away on the high steppes of Mongolia. (430)

Mackinder should have said that these very large steppes of Mongolia are surrounded by very high mountain ranges and that they open to the west via the famous Dzungarian Gate, a geographic feature whose geopolitical importance was (and still is) considerable.

> While the Golden Horde occupied the steppe of Kipchak, from the Sea of Aral through the interval between the Ural range and the Caspian, to the foot of the Carpathians, another horde, descending south-westward between the Caspian sea and the Hindu Kush into Persia, Mesopotamia, and even into Syria, founded the domain of the Ilkhan. A third subsequently struck into Northern China, conquering Cathay. . . . [A]ll the settled margins of the Old World sooner or later felt the expansive force of mobile power originating in the steppe. (430)

The Eurasian Mass and Its Sea-Accessible Periphery

> The conception of Euro-Asia to which we thus attain is that of a continuous land, ice-girt in the north, water-girt elsewhere, measuring 21 million square miles, or more than three times the area of North America, whose centre and north, measuring some 9 million square miles, or more than twice the area of Europe, have no available water-ways to the ocean, but, on the other hand, except in the subarctic forest, are very generally favourable to the mobility of horsemen and camelmen. To east, south, and west of this heart-land are marginal regions, ranged in a vast crescent, accessible to shipmen. (431)

In this final sentence the term *heartland* reappears, this time meaning "central region" and connoting the idea of Eurasia, a spatial area much vaster than that evoked with the previous use of the same word. Subsequently in this sentence appears the image of a vast crescent of marginal land "[t]o the east, south, and west," of the dimensions of Eurasia that are "accessible to shipmen."

But Mackinder fails to elaborate on this "marginal arc," even though he is much more eloquent about the various parts of the "central region" that are relatively uniform. For the sake of precision, following is a list of the different geological units that roughly succeed one another along the edge of the Eurasian plate: to the west, the small massifs of the "cape of Eurasia" and its relatively small mountain ranges (the Alps) that extend those of the Balkans and the Middle East; to the south, the enormous Himalayan ranges that adjoin Tibet and dominate the "Indian

subcontinent," the massifs of Indochina, the massif complex formed by the hills of eastern China and the large ranges of the Far East that border the Pacific. The eastern part of Asia is also bordered by large volcanic archipelagos from Japan to the East Indies. Even worse, Mackinder ignores the fact that this "crescent of marginal land" is also what is called the Asia of monsoons and that in these "marginal lands," that is to say from India to China, are found great civilizations and a massive population.

The only characteristic of these "marginal lands" that Mackinder takes into consideration is that they are "accessible to shipmen," a strange phrase to designate countries that have long been densely populated. These men of whom Mackinder speaks are obviously newcomers, Europeans.

This same sentence marks, at last, the gradual appearance of Mackinder's major thesis, which provides perhaps the beginning of an explanation for the article's cryptic title "The Geographical Pivot of History." It is indeed from the time when Western navigators embarked on the Indian Ocean, then reached the Pacific to return subsequently toward Europe, that globalization began and history changed in scope. The maritime comings and goings that take place from that point along the "crescent of marginal lands" partially bordering the central part of the continent suggest that this central region is a sort of "pivot" around which history allegorically turns.

And yet the use of the term *pivot* is problematic in that the first meaning of this word, in both English and French is a point (*puga*). In both languages it designates "the thin extremity of an axis turning vertically, a cornerstone on which everything is organized, a fixed point by which curves pass on the same plane, the man who organized a conspiracy, etc." (translated from the dictionary *Robert*). However, because of the mass itself formed by the immense plains of Eurasia, these cannot logically be considered a pivot. In anticipation of the commentary on the final part of Mackinder's text, it could be said—as he more or less suggests—that little Prussia was the pivot of greater Germany and its role in the midst of central Europe, even all of Europe.

> Mobility upon the ocean is the natural rival of horse and camel mobility in the heart of the continent . . . The all-important result of the discovery of the Cape road to the Indies was to connect the western and eastern coastal navigations of EuroAsia . . . The one and continuous ocean enveloping the divided and insular lands is, of course, the geographical condition of ultimate unity in the command of the sea, and of the whole theory of modern naval strategy and policy as expounded by such writers as Captain Mahan and Mr. Spencer Wilkinson. (432)

The captain is Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), who was not an admiral as is often said, but a distinguished professor of history at the Military Academy at West Point. Before Mackinder, he theorized a fundamental opposition between a "sea power" (England and, for Mahan, soon the United States) and a "land power" (formerly France,

then the Russian Empire). After having published in 1890 *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, he championed the development of an American war fleet. Spencer Wilkinson was a journalist specializing in naval questions.

> Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan are now a ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce, inaccessible to the land-power of Euro-Asia. (433)

The Development of the Russian Empire

> But the land power still remains, and recent events have again in creased its signifi cance. While the maritime peoples of Western Europe have covered the ocean with their fleets, settled the outer continents, and in varying degree made tributary the oceanic margins of Asia, Russia has organized the Cossacks, and, emerging from her northern forests, has policed the steppe by setting her own nomads to meet the Tartar nomads. The Tudor century, which saw the expansion of Western Europe over the sea, also saw Russian power carried from Moscow through Siberia. The eastward swoop of the horsemen across Asia was an event almost as pregnant with political consequences as was the rounding of the Cape, although the two movements long remained apart. (433)

Mackinder puts forward the role of the Cossacks, whom he considers nomads, to explain the expansion of the Russian Empire starting in the sixteenth century (in 1552, Ivan the Terrible took Kazan from the Tartars). In so doing, he ignores (or passes over silently) much more important and complex causes. To understand the formation of what became the Russian Empire, it is necessary to start with the large forest where Christianized Russians fled to clearings after the destruction of Kiev, and where Mongol horsemen operated less easily. Moscow was one of these clearings, and the noble family there became more or less the vassal of Mongol princes to whom it paid tribute. This was levied on the peasants, whose numbers appreciably grew due to the clearing of the great forest. Moreover, the great plague of 1348 probably barely spread there due to the isolation of the forest, even as it was terrible throughout Europe. After having managed to free themselves from the domination of the Turkic-Mongols, whom they were able to push back initially toward the Urals, the dynasty of the Russian czars, supported by the Church, adapted a large portion of the Mongolian imperial model by enslaving most farmers on the lands they controlled. Until the sixteenth century, these peasants had been armed and were relatively free to burn clearings in the forest; now this freedom, like their

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

weapons, was prohibited; they became the quasi-property of the czar or the nobles who supported him. This "late serfdom," as contemporary historians term it, was characteristic of Russia and lasted until the mid-nineteenth century.

And yet some peasants managed to escape and remain free, moving away to the steppes of the south or into the forest beyond the Urals, further and further east. This is the origin of the Cossack horsemen who, under distant imperial auspices, managed to spread rather easily in the forests of Siberia by following the waterways, because there were fewer trees on their banks. These forests of very cold, long winters were indeed very sparsely populated, but there were plentiful rich furs to be had, and sold throughout Europe. The expansion of the Russian Empire toward the south, and its grassy steppes with fertile soils, would occur later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then the Cossacks—once again—fearsome horsemen, theoretically independent but supervised by officers of the czar, led incessant wars in Turkestan against tribes of Muslim pastoralists who were suppressed or even exterminated. The Cossacks, proud to be horsemen, were organized in fortified villages, *stanitsas*, surrounded by lands that they had the right to keep in their families. These regularly spaced *stanitsas* formed a type of *limes* (frontiers) in the face of adversary tribes, from the northern Caucasus piedmont to the outskirts of Vladivostok, for nearly 9,000 kilometers.

However, the vast expanse of lands to clear in the forests and on the Russian steppe, especially on behalf of the czar and the nobles, made gradual population growth possible, so that by the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire was the most populated state in Europe. In addition, the system of serfdom provided the tsar's army large masses of soldiers for life.

One of the weaknesses in Mackinder's reasoning is that in his view, the Russian Empire is the result only of the existence of very vast plains in Eastern Europe and Asia. Thus he makes no reference to the fact that the expansion of this empire also resulted from the strong demographic growth of the Russian people. This was made possible by the presence of lands available for progressive clearing: in 1796, the Russian Empire had a population of 36 million (only 1.5 million of whom lived east of the Urals), making it the most populated state in Europe. France in 1789 counted just 26 million. In 1900, the Russian Empire comprised 67 million people.

> In the wake of the Cossack, Russia has safely emerged from her former seclusion in the northern forests. Perhaps the change of greatest intrinsic importance which took place in Europe in the last century was the southward migration of the Russian peasants, so that, whereas agricultural settlements formerly ended at the forest boundary, the centre of the population of all European Russia now lies to south of that boundary, in the midst of the wheat-fields which have replaced the more western steppes. Odessa has here risen to importance with the rapidity of an American city. (433)

Mackinder ignores the fact that "the southward migration of the Russian peasants" is primarily the result of large landowners bringing their serfs to cultivate wheat for export to Western Europe, including during times of famine. Serfdom was not officially abolished until 1861.

> A generation ago steam and the Suez Canal appeared to have increased the mobility of sea-power relatively to land-power. Railways acted chiefly as feeders to ocean-going commerce. But trans-continental railways are now transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such effect as in the closed heart-land of Euro Asia, in vast areas . . . Railways work the greater wonders in the steppe. (434)

> The Russian railways have a clear run of 9,000 kilometers from Wirballen in the west to Vladivostok in the east. The Russian army in Manchuria is as significant evidence of mobile land-power as the British army in South Africa was of sea-power. True, that the Trans Siberian railway is still a single and precarious line of communication . . . The spaces within the Russian Empire and Mongolia are so vast, and their potentialities in population, wheat, cotton, fuel, and metals so incalculably great, that it is inevitable that a vast economic world, more or less apart, will there develop inaccessible to oceanic commerce. (434)

Only in His Conclusion Does Mackinder Outline a Thesis

> As we consider this rapid review of the broader currents of history, does not a certain persistence of geographical relationship become evident? Is not the pivot region of the world's politics that vast area of Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to the horse-riding nomads, and is to-day about to be covered with a network of rail ways? There have been and are here the conditions of a mobility of military and economic power of a far-reaching and yet limited character. Russia replaces the Mongol Empire. Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India, and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen. In the world at large she occupies the central strategical position held by Germany in Europe. She can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides, save the north. The full development of her modern railway mobility is merely a matter of time. Nor is it likely that any possible social revolution will alter her essential relations to the great geographical limits of her existence. Wisely recognizing the fundamental limits of her power, her rulers have parted with Alaska; for it is as much a law of policy for Russia to own nothing overseas as for Britain to be supreme on the ocean. Outside the pivot area, in a great inner crescent, are Germany, Austria,

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

> Turkey, India, and China, and in an outer crescent, Britain, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada, and Japan. In the present condition of the balance of power, the pivot state, Russia, is not equivalent to the peripheral states, and there is room for an equipoise in France. The United States has recently become an eastern power, affecting the European balance not directly, but through Russia, and she will construct the Panama Canal to make her Mississippi and Atlantic resources available in the Pacific. From this point of view the real divide between east and west is to be found in the Atlantic Ocean. The oversetting of the balance of power in favour 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. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia. The threat of such an event should, therefore, throw France into alliance with the over-sea powers, and France, Italy, Egypt, India, and Corea [sic] would become so many bridge heads where the outside navies would support armies to compel the pivot allies to deploy land forces and prevent them from concentrating their whole strength on fleets. On a smaller scale that was what Wellington accomplished from his sea-base at Torres Vedras in the Peninsular War. May not this in the end prove to be the strategical function of India in the British Imperial system? Is not this the idea underlying Mr. Amery's conception that the British military front stretches from the Cape through India to Japan? (434–436)

This Leopold Amery, member of the Conservative Party, was very active in imperial affairs, and in 1917 was the actual writer of the famous Balfour Declaration for British support of a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine. In 1904 Cape Town (that is, South Africa) seemed all the more strategically precious to the English because they had just won in 1902 the war against the Boers, themselves supported by the Germans (of Tanganyika and southwest Africa). At the same time, the Germans had built the "Baghdad railway."

> The development of the vast potentialities of South America might have a decisive influence upon the system. They might strengthen the United States, or, on the other hand, if Germany were to challenge the Monroe doctrine successfully, they might detach Berlin from what I may perhaps describe as a pivot policy. The particular combinations of power brought into balance are not material; my contention is that from a geographical point of view they are likely to rotate round the pivot state, which is always likely to be great, but with limited mobility as compared with the surrounding marginal and insular powers.
>
> I have spoken as a geographer. 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. In proportion as these quantities are accurately estimated are we likely to adjust differences without the crude resort to arms. 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. (436)

To explain the power of the Russian Empire, Mackinder thus places the greatest importance on a fact of geology and physical geography—the extent of the Eurasian plate. And, having at the outset strongly evoked the Mongol invasions that had not existed for more than five centuries, he tends to minimize the role of political and military structures that made possible the conquest and control of this vast territory for three centuries, all the while trying to expand it further. Mackinder's thesis is thus strictly determinist and actually rather rudimentary, as he makes an important geological fact, the vast expanse of the plans, the fundamental cause for the existence of the Russian Empire. This thesis seems also to apply to the area of the United States and Canada that extends over the North American plate, where the biogeographic elements and the initial small population correspond rather well with the characteristics of the Eurasian plate. On the other hand, Mackinder's thesis cannot explain the very old political fragmentation of the Sahara and the vast African plate that extends it.

On such issues, the great geographer Élisée Reclus, who wrote much more than the nineteen volumes of his *Nouvelle géographie universelle* (New Universal Geography), conducted far more complex geographical reasoning associating natural elements with historic and political causalities. In 1904, the same year as the famous Mackinder lecture on the supposed "geographical pivot of History," Reclus, one year before his death, completed his second major work, *L'homme et la terre* (Man and Earth, in six volumes), a very modern approach not only to the history of empires, including those of the twentieth century, but also the fate of man.

> The social movements of all times have played around essentially the same physical features, for I doubt whether the progressive desiccation of Asia and Africa, even if proved, has in historical times vitally altered the human environment. The westward march of empire appears to me to have been a short rotation of marginal power round the south-western and western edge of the pivotal area. The Nearer, Middle, and Far Eastern questions relate to the unstable equilibrium of inner and outer powers in those parts of the marginal crescent where local power is, at present, more or less negligible.
>
> In conclusion, it may be well expressly to point out that the substitution of some new control of the inland area for that of Russia would not tend to reduce the geographical significance of the pivot position. Were the Chinese, for instance, organized by the Japanese, to overthrow the Russian Empire and conquer its territory, they might

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region. (437) (End of article.)

Mackinder after His Too-Celebrated Lecture

In 1904, Mackinder was almost forty-five years old and taught geography at Oxford, in Reading, and at the London School of Economics, where he had become director in 1900. But in English universities of the time, geography was hardly represented because the discipline was taught much less frequently than in Germany and France. On the other hand, starting in the eighteenth century, the large English banks already had a global network of geographic, economic, and political information for use in their overseas operations.

Mackinder had made the first ascent of Mount Kenya in 1899, and in 1902 he had published *Britain and British Seas*, a book of classic regional geography (geology, climate, population, economy) in which he also expressed concern for the fate of the British Empire. Starting in 1900, Mackinder participated in political activities of the Liberal Party, where he had liberal-imperialist leanings before joining the Conservatives. In 1910 this earned him a parliamentary seat in Glasgow; he kept it until 1922, after having served in important political roles. Before World War I, he had expressed strong concern about the rise in power of the German navy, and after the Soviet revolution, he became British High Commissioner in South Russia in 1919, with an English expeditionary force that strove to support the White armies against the Bolsheviks.

One would have thought that after his 1904 article, in later publications Mackinder would have further developed his most original (but in the end almost botched) points. Yet there is little mention of them.

Mackinder hardly readdresses his famous theory of the state-pivot in his 1919 book, *Democratic Ideal and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*. Inspired especially by World War I, it principally addresses the historic relations of France and Germany, the first showing democratic idealism since the beginning of the nineteenth century and the second, in contrast, a great realism. In the second chapter, Mackinder discusses England, the naval power par excellence. It is in the third chapter that he takes up again the theme of heartland (but not the term *pivot*) to extend it to the whole *World Island*, that is to say the Old World, Eurasia, and also Africa.

In this World Island, Mackinder sees (1) a European headland (he shamelessly incorporates the Mediterranean with the Maghreb and Turkey); (2) a Siberian heartland; (3) a crescent formed by the circle of monsoon countries; (4) a vast arid zone from the Sahara to the Middle East; (5) a southern heartland (all of Africa south of

the Sahara) which obviously cannot have the same power as the Eurasian heartland. In the fourth chapter of this book, Mackinder mainly deals with the defeat of Germany and his fears of a German-Bolshevik alliance after the treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918). It was after the publication of this book that he was named High Commissioner in South Russia.

Between the two wars, Mackinder's ideas were taken up in Germany by Karl Haushofer, a general and good geographer who in 1924 founded the periodical *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* (Journal for Geopolitics) to help Germans (notably professors of history-geography) deal with the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles after their defeat. Haushofer, who became the leader of the German school of geopolitics, developed close relations with the Nazis and used the themes of heartland and geographical pivot to advocate for an alliance between Germany and Russia. Mackinder had already mentioned this at the end of his 1904 article. It also interested Stalin, and Haushofer was considered as having inspired the German-Soviet pact of 1939. However, he expressed disagreement with the June 1941 German attack on the Soviet Union, resulting in his arrest.

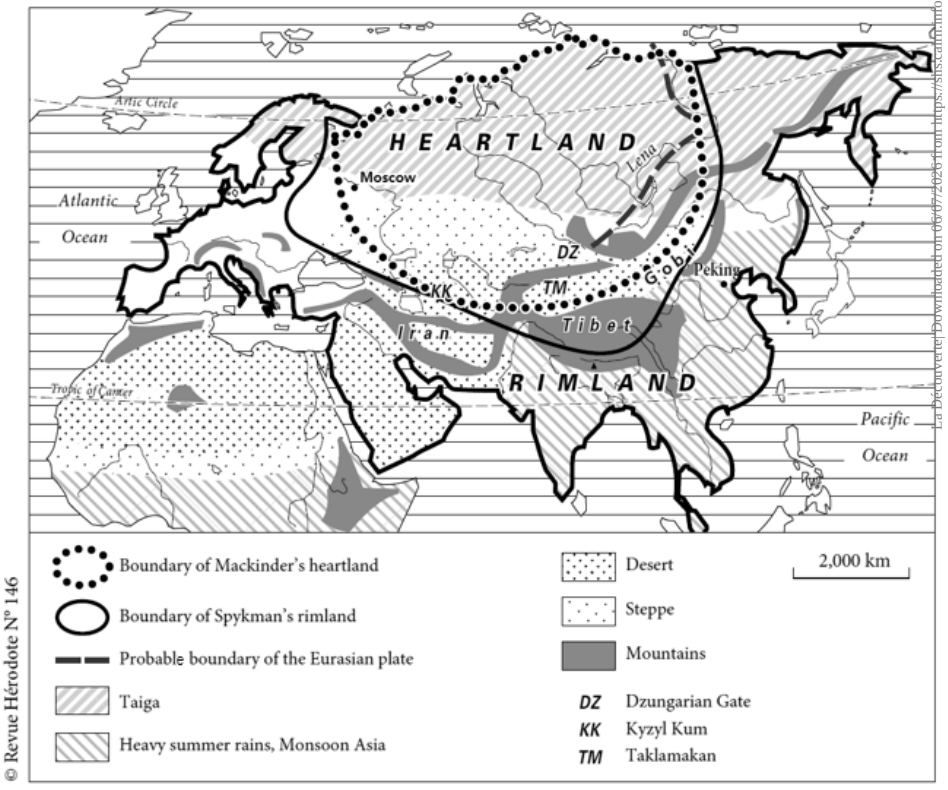
In the United States, all this provoked new interest in Mackinder's ideas, and in 1943, at the request of the great American geographer Isaiah Bowman, he published "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. The article was about as long as the famous "Geographical Pivot of History." But in this 1943 piece, Mackinder does not reuse his formula. On the other hand he returns at length to the word *heartland*, which he repeats many times. Among other things, he tells about how the concept of heartland gradually came to him, starting with the sudden French defeat in 1870, demonstrating Germany's new power, until the outbreak of war in Manchuria. He also reminds his readers, to explain his silence in his 1904 article on the 1905 defeat of the Russian army, that his presentation was made in January, and that subsequently the text was not modified. Mainly he says, rather absurdly, that the idea of heartland came to him from the difficult war that the English conducted against the Boers in South Africa. But he does not say that these English were fighting very far away from England.

Thus Mackinder fully maintains the term *heartland*, but he reduces slightly the extent of the meaning he had originally given it, when he considers that to the east, which he calls the "vast region of the Lena River," there is in reality a group of mountains and not the extension of Siberian plains as he had initially suggested.

By contrast, Mackinder declares that he hardly uses the term *pivot* (or state-pivot), "which had been appropriate for an academic thesis at the beginning of the century" but "is no longer suitable in the international situation that has emerged from the first great crisis of contemporary world revolution" (the United Kingdom was an ally of the USSR in 1943!).

Hérodote, n° 146-147, La Découverte, 3rd Quarter 2012.

MAP 1: MACKINDER'S *HEARTLAND*



> All things considered, the conclusion is unavoidable that if the Soviet Union emerges from this war as conqueror of Germany, she must rank as the greatest land Power on the globe. Moreover, she will be the Power in the strategically strongest defensive position. The Heartland is the greatest natural fortress on earth. For the first time in history it is manned by a garrison sufficient both in number and quality. (601)

In his 1943 article, Mackinder no longer speaks of the "crescents" he had so briefly named at the periphery of the heartland. He is unaware or does not note that an American, Nicholas Spykman, gives them great importance by launching the idea of the rimland (as in the rim of a wheel).

After having expressed at length the wish that after the war Germany would be washed of its dominant philosophy "by irrigating the German mind with the clean water of a rival philosophy," Mackinder states:

> I make no pretense to forecasting the future of humanity. What I am concerned with are the conditions under which we set about winning the peace when victory in the war has been achieved. In regard to the pattern of the postwar world, now being studied by many people for the first time, it is important that a line should be carefully drawn between idealistic blueprints and realistic and scholarly maps presenting concepts—political, economic, strategic, and so forth—based on the recognition of obstinate facts. With that in mind, attention might be drawn to a great feature of global geography: a girdle, as it were, hung around the north polar regions. It begins as the Sahara desert, is followed as one moves eastward by the Arabian, Iranian, Tibetan and Mongolian deserts, and then extends, by way of the wildernesses of Lenaland, Alaska and the Laurentian shield of Canada, to the sub-arid belt of the western United States. (602)

I am dismayed by the casual disregard with which Mackinder, while calling himself a geographer, ignores the major geographic differences that exist between all the areas he covers, between the stretches of desert with no vegetation and those covered with great forests. But why does he not include those of Siberia?

> That girdle of deserts and wildernesses is a feature of the first importance in global geography. Within it lie two related features of almost equal significance: the Heartland, and the basin of the Midland Ocean (North Atlantic) with its four subsidiaries (Mediterranean, Baltic, Arctic and Caribbean Seas). (602)

Why invent that so-called "deserts" surround the North Atlantic; why would one not include Greenland? Mackinder says:

> For the purposes of what I see described in American writings as "Grand Strategy," it is necessary to build broad generalizations in geography no less than in history and economics. I have described my concept of the Heartland, which I have no hesitation in saying is more valid and useful today than it was either twenty or forty years ago. (603)

In conclusion, Mackinder returns again to the supposed "girdle of broad desert spaces" (603) that he mentions "around the twin unit just described—heartland and the basin of the Midland Ocean," (604) namely the North Atlantic. It is not even a question, anymore, of the crescents he had already so briefly evoked in 1904 concerning the southern border of the heartland. Yet he now raises the importance of demographics:

> [A] thousand million people of ancient oriental civilization inhabit the Monsoon lands of India and China. They must grow to prosperity . . . They will then balance that other thousand million who live between the Missouri and the Yenisei. A balanced globe of human beings . . . . (605)

The casualness with which Mackinder—almost forgetting his heartland—launches the image of this great cloak of spaces he calls desert lands, which he "throws" around the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans , and which he considers "a feature of first importance in global geography," is quite appalling for a geographer in the first half of the twentieth century.

All the same, a Celebrity Who Remains Great at the Beginning of This Century

The best proof of this celebrity is the article "The Revenge of Geography" that the American journalist Robert D. Kaplan published in the May-June 2009 issue of *Foreign Policy*. Surprising title. The French translation was published three months later in *Courrier International* (1-7 October 2009). Kaplan is a prominent but disturbing international-relations specialist. He has authored, over the past twenty years, several works, as well as high-profile articles in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. In "The Revenge of Geography," Kaplan principally refers (a dozen times) to Mackinder.

First, he says he would like to start a "plea for realism in diplomacy" and urges intellectual opinion and particularly international-relations specialists to take geography more fully into account. Indeed, Kaplan begins by saying, in the first paragraph where geography is not yet the issue, that "When rapturous Germans tore down the Berlin Wall . . . [i]t began an intellectual cycle that saw all divisions, geographic and otherwise, as surmountable; that referred to 'realism' and 'pragmatism' only as pejoratives," and where "the armed liberalism and the democracy-promoting neo-conservatism of the 1990s shared the same universalist aspirations. But alas, when a fear of Munich leads to overreach the result is Vietnam or in the current case, Iraq" (96).

Kaplan refers no doubt to a supposed American desire to defend at all costs a democracy threatened in Vietnam by a Communist dictatorship (in the 1960s-70s), or to the desire to reestablish democracy in 2003 in a country, Iraq, oppressed by a dictator who seemed very dangerous for the whole world after the 11 September 2001 attacks.

Kaplan continues:

> And thus began the rehabilitation of realism, and with it another intellectual cycle. "Realist" is now a mark of respect, "neocon" a term of derision. The Vietnam analogy has vanquished that of Munich. Thomas Hobbes, who extolled the moral benefits of fear and saw anarchy as the chief threat to society, has elbowed out Isaiah Berlin as the philosopher of the present cycle. The focus now is less on universal ideals than particular distinctions, from ethnicity to culture to religion . . . realism is about recognizing and embracing those forces beyond our control that constrain human action—culture, tradition, history, the bleaker tides of passion that lie just beneath the veneer of civilization. This poses what, for realists, is the central question in foreign affairs: Who can do what to whom? And of all the unsavory truths in which realism is rooted, the bluntest, most uncomfortable, and most deterministic of all is geography. (96–98)

"Mackinder's work is the archetype of the geographical discipline," says Kaplan, who deftly summarizes this as follows: "Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls." Kaplan adds: "But perhaps the most significant guide to the revenge of geography is the father of modern geopolitics himself—Sir Halford J. Mackinder—who is famous not for a book but for a single article, 'The Geographical Pivot of History'." (99)

In the *Annuaire des Relations Internationales de 2011* (21-50), I thoroughly analyzed Robert Kaplan's article, emphasizing Mackinder's thesis more than Kaplan's debatable political arguments for justifying a return of US policy to a "realism" that is actually very strategic. But Kaplan has a rather grandiose concept of geography, of which he has a very vague idea. What strikes me as surprising in his long references to Mackinder is that he does not seem to realize the strategic shortcomings of the heartland thesis that today have become obvious.

Why does Kaplan not take note of the little importance Mackinder accords to the periphery of his heartland, of these "marginal lands," these "crescents" to which he devotes only a few lines? Why does he not breathe a word of Spykman in his article, whose rimland essentially complements Mackinder's thesis?

Nicholas Spykman, journalist turned professor of international relations at Yale University, published in 1942 a text for which President Roosevelt had asked him several years earlier to explain to Americans what had happened in the Old World: *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*. Spykman revisited the idea of the heartland, but he made the crescents, those marginal lands that Mackinder neglected, an area of great importance. The rimland of Eurasia (bearing in mind the rim of a wheel, signifying less precisely a border) is the idea that implicitly complements the famous pivot.

According to Spykman, the rimland comprises the countries of Western Europe and the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. Spykman underlines their very great geostrategic importance to counter the expansion of the Russian or Soviet Empire and to prevent future warships from deploying on the global ocean.

Spykman died of cancer at less than fifty years of age, in 1943, before *The Geography of the Peace* was published. This outlined the strategy of containment carried out by the United States, first by their fleet of aircraft carriers, then in western Europe, then in the Middle East, in Japan, in Korea initially after facing the 1950 Communist offensive, then in China by making a "secret" alliance with the Communist government against the USSR in 1972, before the end of the Vietnam War . . . . Since then, what changes have taken place in the overall geostrategic reality!

If he had revisited some of the refrains attributed to Mackinder, Spykman could have added his own:

> *Who controls Eastern Europe, rules the heartland;*
> *Who controls the heartland, rules the World Island;*
> *Who rules the World Island, rules the World,*

Or, according to Spykman:

> *Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia;*
> *Who rules Eurasia, controls the destinies of the world.*

But in this rimland, China today is becoming the superpower!

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