



Original Article

NATO Expansion and the Rimland: A Geopolitical Assessment

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Manuscript ID:
IBMIRJ -2025-020905

Submitted: 04 Aug. 2025

Revised: 09 Aug. 2025

Accepted: 05 Sept. 2025

Published: 30 Sept. 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-9

Pp. 27-30

September 2025

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18524015

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18524015>



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Abstract

Nicholas Spykman's rimland theory suggests Eurasia's coastal periphery has a strategic advantage in controlling heartland power with the ability to maintain a balance globally. This is an assessment of NATO's expansion efforts since the end of the Cold War as seen through the lens of the rimland and how the expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltic States has altered the world's geopolitical dynamics. This review is based on a number of academic sources and evaluates NATO's position as a buffer against Russia's resurgence and its implications on the rimland as demonstrated in the Ukraine conflict and hybrid threats. The assessment will also evaluate how NATO's expansions have contributed to multipolar stability and address criticisms of NATO's expansions as provocative and over extended. The results indicate NATO's use of the rimland strategy is a continuation of classical geopolitics adapted for today's challenges such as cyber warfare and energy security, resulting in a robust alliance framework. Overall, the geopolitical analysis demonstrates the continued value of rimland control in counteracting heartland revisionism.

Keywords: NATO Expansion, Rimland Theory, Nicholas Spykman, Geopolitics, Heartland Containment, Russian Influence, Ukraine Conflict, Multipolar Dynamics

Introduction

Since the 1990s, the expansion of NATO into the former Warsaw Pact and Baltic States has further incorporated the eastern rim of Eurasia into the alliance and created a debate about the impact of security and provocation on relations between Russia and NATO (Ali et al., 2025; "Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War," 2022). The Rimland Theory of Spykman, which argues that the ability to dominate over coastal zones surrounding the Heartland of Eurasia is fundamental to achieving global power, serves as a framework for understanding this development. In a multi-polar world, the enlargements of NATO -- from the incorporation of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 to potential future accessions -- are intended to stabilize the Rimland vis-a-vis Russian influence (Mirza & Ayub, 2022). This approach to enlargement is consistent with Spykman's argument that control over the littoral regions, or the "rimland," is fundamental to achieving global dominion, stating that "Whoever controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; Whoever rules Eurasia controls the fates of the world." (Fettweis, 2000) From a geopolitical perspective, this view highlights the continued relevance of Spykman's conceptual framework in evaluating current power relationships and alliance strategies within the Eurasian Theatre of Operations (Astarita & Marconi, 2024; Gray, 2015).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has heightened these tensions, as it has framed NATO as a Rimland bulwark. Therefore, this review integrates historical and contemporary assessments to evaluate NATO's expansions from a geopolitical viewpoint and argue for a revised Rimland model that includes aspects of alliance solidarity and other than traditional threats. Thus, by assessing strategic implications, the article contributes to discussions regarding Euro-Atlantic security during a period of great-power rivalry.

Overview of Spykman's Rimland Theory

Spykman's "Geography of Peace" (1944), and his work "America's Strategy in World Politics" (1942), are based on an idea that Mackinder's "Heartland," is surrounded by a rim of coastal states (from western Europe to eastern Asia) known as the "Rimland." According to Spykman, whoever controls the Rimland can potentially prevent any one country from gaining the ability to dominate the entire Eurasian continent through encircling the Heartland.

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How to cite this article:

Kumar, R. (2025). NATO Expansion and the Rimland: A Geopolitical Assessment. *InSight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 2(9), 27–30. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18524015>

The most important aspects of Spykman's theory are that countries in the Rimland are vulnerable to invasion from either land or sea; that countries need to form alliances if they want to project their power across long distances; and that the best way to do so would be with advanced air/naval capabilities.

This aspect of Spykman's theory is opposite of Mackinder's "Heartland Theory" which suggests that the interior of the Eurasian continent will be the center of the world's power. Spykman sees the coastal regions as critical for the control of the Eurasian continent. Unlike Mackinder who thought geography was the primary determinant of international relations, Spykman believed that there were many ways to shape international relations, including through politics. He therefore recommended that the United States should have a very active role in the Rimland to create a balance of power. In the context of the Cold War, Spykman's recommendations influenced the development of containment policy. Today Spykman's ideas can be applied to the digital and economic realms where the Rimland represents a web of interdependent zones of security. In the case of NATO, the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe is framed as a means to protect the European portion of the Rimland from potential expansion by the countries of the Heartland. Thus, Spykman's ideas remain relevant today when trying to understand how current geopolitical relationships and conflicts arise, especially in the region of Eurasia (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022). Additionally, unlike many other theorists, Spykman does not see the relationship between politics and geography as fixed, but instead views politics as a dynamic force that has the capability to shape future geopolitical realities, and thus the present is different from the past (Pejić, 2019).

Historical Applications and Reinterpretations

NATO's creation in 1949 exemplified Spykman's Rimland concept by forming a coalition of West European coastal countries to encircle and limit Soviet influence in the Eurasian Heartland as Spykman identified littoral power as key to containing the Heartland in the Cold War era (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022; Gerace, 1991). The subsequent inclusion of Greece and Turkey into NATO in 1952 further solidified NATO's protection of the Mediterranean littorals from potential Heartland power threats to access the seas and expand NATO's air-naval capabilities (Fettweis, 2000). In the post-Cold War period, NATO expanded to include the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe through the NATO enlargement of 1999 and 2004. The post-Communist enlargement of NATO created an enlarged "Zone of Democratic Peace" as a bulwark to deter future Russian aggression and provide a protective buffer zone against future resurgence of Russian influence in Eurasia (Mirza & Ayub, 2022; Ali et al., 2025). Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, NATO has deployed additional forces and formed new partnerships with member-states bordering the Black and Baltic Seas to reinforce the NATO Rimland and create a barrier to Russian aggression and hybrid warfare as tensions between Russia and NATO continue to rise ("Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War," 2022; Pejić, 2019). These continued efforts by NATO to protect the NATO Rimland demonstrate the continued use of Spykman's original work in understanding modern-day geopolitics, particularly where competing global powers are vying for influence over the critical littoral zones throughout Eurasia (Fettweis, 2000).

Zbigniew Brzezinski, among others, also used Spykman's concepts of the Rimland to describe his vision for a post-Soviet multipolar world as described in various authors' views combining the geopolitical ideas of Mackinder, Spykman, and Brzezinski. In these works, Brzezinski advocated for the expansion of NATO to incorporate critical "geopolitical pivot" states such as Ukraine to prevent the resurgence of the Eurasian Heartland (Mirza & Ayub, 2022). The historical views of Russia, which have been shaped by centuries of insecurity and view NATO enlargements as a form of encirclement that diminishes the size of their buffer zones and rekindles rivalry, have compelled countermeasures such as the formation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Ali et al., 2025). These historical examples illustrate how NATO's role as the defender of the NATO Rimland has evolved from bipolar containment—following Spykman's foundational influence on Cold War-era strategies—to multipolar stability during the Great Power competition (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022; Gerace, 1991). The evolution of NATO's role as a Rimland defender is indicative of the continuous adaptation of Spykman's core tenets of the strategic significance of the Eurasian littoral in modern-day geopolitical analysis (Gerace, 1991).

Relevance in Contemporary Geopolitical Dynamics

Expansionist policies by NATO in today's world are aligned with the Rimland policy by helping to build up the capability to deter aggression in many weak borderlands — the accession of the Baltic States in 2004 and Finland and Sweden in 2023-24 was motivated by Russia's war against Ukraine (Ack et al., 2024; Gioe et al., 2024), and it helps to protect the northern European Rimland from Russian hybrid warfare and energy coercion. Membership in NATO by Romania and Bulgaria also strengthens the ability to access the sea, and thereby counteracts Russia's dominance in this Rimland choke point (Koval & Vachudova, 2024) as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean where NATO has an active presence as evidenced by the support of Greece and Turkey — in addition to projecting power, this allows NATO to be able to monitor and ensure the security of the major maritime routes and thereby prevent or contain potential Heartland incursions into the larger Mediterranean basin (Kotoulas, 2021). Controlling the Rimland, as outlined in Spykman's theory, is key to achieving global influence as it restricts the growth of land-based powers and prevents them from projecting their military capabilities into other parts of the world (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022; Pierre-Emmanuel, 2023). Due to the high population densities and large industrial bases of these regions, they are highly valuable as areas of control for projecting military force globally and for maintaining stability throughout the international system (Gray, 2015).

The Ukrainian conflict exemplifies Rimland friction, specifically that NATO's support of Kyiv as a non-member pivot state prevented the Heartland from encroaching upon NATO territory. Additionally, multipolarity, particularly China's rise in the Indo-Pacific, has prompted NATO to pursue global partnerships which extend the logic of Rimland beyond Europe (Gray, 2015). Missile defense systems installed in Poland have amplified NATO's Rimland advantage, whereas cyber threats necessitate adaptive strategies to counter (Grgic, 2024). While the expansion of NATO enhances the resilience of the alliance, there is always the possibility of further escalation of the conflict in disputed territories and regions (Gerace, 1991). As such, the relationship between

reinforcing regional security and possibly escalating the conflict between competing states continues to be an ongoing challenge in terms of balancing the two (Gerace, 1991). Although the Heartland model of Mackinder is still considered a viable model for understanding the geographic basis of the competitive relationship between nation-states, and although the model has been criticized for its determinism and inability to account for modern political realities (Mirza & Ayub, 2022; Izgarskaia, 2023), it remains a relevant model for understanding the competitive dynamic of the modern nation-state system.

Critiques and Modern Adaptations

The NATO expansion into the Rimland has been criticized for its perceived aggressive nature by Russia and other countries and is viewed by many as a violation of assurances made after the Cold War that reduced buffer zones and reignited rivalries, which has resulted in conflict, including the Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea (Ali et al., 2025). In addition, critics have argued that the expansive nature of NATO's operations will continue to create division within member states as well as create vulnerabilities to both asymmetric and hybrid threats in the Baltic States (Gioe et al., 2024; Gerace, 1991). Similarly, Spykman's theory is also critiqued for being overly deterministic in its emphasis on geography as opposed to understanding that politics are fluid and can be influenced by a multitude of factors, as well as being limited in its consideration of non-state actors and how globalization is creating a multipolar world where spatial divisions are becoming less rigid (Pejić, 2019; İzgaršća, 2023).

To help address the limitations of Spykman's original Rimland Theory, modern theories are now being developed by using the concept of "extended Rimland" to incorporate both military alliances and economic initiatives, including the European Union's Eastern Partnership which is intended to bring East European partners such as Ukraine into the fold of the EU (Koval & Vachudová, 2024). As a result of these efforts, academic literature has proposed new hybrid approaches that include not only cyber-defense but also energy diversification as means to counter Russian influence and use of hybrid aggression (Gioe et al., 2024; Gerace, 1991). The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept also represents an evolution of NATO's strategic thinking as it recognizes the need for member-states to be resilient in the face of hybrid threats, while simultaneously continuing to expand partnerships throughout the Asia-Pacific Rimland to meet the challenges of the emerging multipolar world (Grgić, 2024). Thus, by adapting traditional geopolitical models such as Mackinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland to recognize that there are now multiple influences and non-geographic variables in play, including information flows, the models continue to be relevant in today's complex geopolitics and by doing so provide a flexible and inclusive approach to dealing with the complexities of the twenty-first century (Pejić, 2019; İzgaršća, 2023). Nevertheless, the continued viability of traditional geopolitical models, such as Mackinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland, in a world of complex interdependence and non-state threats remains a topic of ongoing discussion amongst academics (Izgarca, 2023).

Conclusion

The expansion of NATO has been an example of how to strategically apply the Rimland Theory as a method of building a buffer in the coastal areas of Eurasia to counter the threat posed by the Heartland, while also dealing with the implications of a new world order that is based on multipolarity. The use of NATO as a containment strategy to deal with past threats and its current use as a deterrence strategy demonstrate the ongoing utility of Rimland Theory as a response to the changing nature of threats in the modern era. However, critics have raised concerns regarding the risk of provoking other nations; however, NATO has demonstrated its ability to adapt to this criticism by developing cooperative and innovative methods to maintain the relevance of the Rimland Theory. As global instability continues to rise, it is expected that NATO's role in the Rimland will continue to play a significant role in maintaining stability in the region, therefore continuing to provide justification for future research into creating inclusive security architectures. Future studies of NATO should explore the possibility of integrating NATO with rising powers to create a stable balance between multi-polarity.

Acknowledgment

I, Rakesh Kumar, Asst. Prof and Head, Dept. of Geography, Murarka College Sultanganj, TMBU, Bhagalpur, Bihar do hereby acknowledge that no financial or any other support was provided to me. Also that I face no conflict of Interest regarding publication of these papers.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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