



Original Article

# Reinterpreting Mackinder’s Heartland Theory in the 21st-Century Multipolar World

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**Abstract**

*Mackinder’s “heartland” theory was initially introduced by Halford Mackinder in 1904; he argued that whoever controlled the heartland of Eurasia (i.e., a vast area of land that included all of Europe, most of Asia and a large portion of Africa) would have control of the world, which was to emphasize land based power over sea-based power in the context of strategic geopolitical thought. This paper will provide a review of the various reinterpretations of this theory within the context of today’s twenty-first century multipolar world – where countries like China and India are becoming more powerful and challenging the Western world’s previous dominance. As well as providing an overview of the ways in which this theory can be applied to current events (such as the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine), as well as current initiatives (for example, China’s Belt and Road initiative), it will also address criticisms of the theory with regards to technology and globalization. The study finds that while Mackinder’s ideas continue to have influence, they need to be modified to consider multipolarity, dispersed sources of power and the nature of non-traditional threats to maintain their relevance. Overall, this is important because it illustrates the relationship between geography and geopolitics, and how both contribute to the way nations interact with each other.*

**Keywords:** Heartland Theory, Halford Mackinder, Multipolar World, Geopolitics, Eurasia, Belt and Road Initiative, Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Reinterpretation

**Introduction**

A new era of multipolarity has challenged the traditional concepts of classical geopolitical theories. The Heartland Theory formulated by Halford Mackinder in 1904, titled "The Geographical Pivot of History", proposed that the interior of the Eurasian continent was a vast expanse of resources and hence the pivot of history. The Heartland was considered inaccessible to sea powers and therefore critical to land-based empires. Mackinder further asserted that "Who Rules the Heartland Commands the World-Island; Who Rules the World-Island Commands the World". In this sense, the competition between land and sea powers has shaped world politics since the time Mackinder first stated this concept (Knutsen, 2014; Mackinder, 1943).

As such, the theory was influential in the development of 20th century strategy in both World Wars and the Cold War. The 21st century's emergence of multiple actors in the international system, including China, India, and various regional alliances, require a new interpretation of the original theory (Mearsheimer, 2002). Therefore, this reinterpretation aims to assess whether the core components of Mackinder's original theory, specifically the importance of the Eurasian land mass in shaping the balance of power globally, continue to be valid within the context of the changing nature of the global economy and the evolving nature of international relations (Bakare & Toor, 2019).

To assess the application of Mackinder's original theory to current geopolitics, this paper examines the current academic literature on the application of Mackinder's theory to current and future conflict. Specifically, the paper will examine the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing realignment of the Eurasian space. Ultimately, through a synthesis of historical and contemporary analysis of the literature, this paper will argue for the application of a "dispersed Heartland" model, which accepts multiple power centers and hybrid threats.

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### **Overview of Mackinder's Heartland Theory**

The concept developed by Mackinder was conceived in early twentieth-century in the context of the “spatial revolution” due to improvements in transportation and communication and changed patterns of interaction between countries. According to Mackinder the world could be divided into three geographical areas; the “World-Island” (the continent of Europe, Asia and Africa) the “Heartland” (the middle part of Eurasia, roughly stretching from the Volga River to the Yangtze River); and two peripheral “crescent” areas: an inner crescent of marginal or periphery lands; and an outer crescent of insular states (Britain and the U.S.). The Heartland according to Mackinder would provide a strategic resource base to enable a state to exert global influence. Despite being influential in geopolitical thinking since the time it was first formulated, Mackinder’s theory has been criticized for its deterministic nature and the degree to which it can be distorted to fit changing political realities (Изгарская, 2023). Nevertheless, Mackinder’s basic contention that Eurasia will continue to represent a significant arena for the pursuit of global influence appears to still have relevance today, especially as the increased ability of land based military power to challenge traditional maritime based military power becomes more pronounced (Li et al., 2020). This renewed interest in Mackinder’s Heartland theory can be seen in the renewed interest in Eurasia among major global powers (as reflected in their respective foreign policies) and mirrors the types of geopolitical concerns that underpinned U.S. containment policy during the Cold War (Fettweis, 2000).

Subsequent revisions to the theory (in 1919 and again in 1943) added additional territory to the Heartland, including some territories in eastern Europe and further emphasized the importance of the Heartland in counteracting the power of sea-based nations. Mackinder’s ideas were also deterministic in terms of his views on geography and how it influences the struggle for power. He viewed continents as fixed arenas for the struggle for power, and the Heartland as advantageous because of its inaccessibility to sea-based forces. His ideas were influential in shaping the thinking of other geographers, such as Nicholas Spykman who shifted attention away from the Heartland and toward what he called the “Rimland”. However, Mackinder’s ideas about the importance of controlling large portions of the Eurasian land mass in order to achieve global influence provided the basis for many of the ideas that are central to the study of geopolitics today. In fact, these ideas continue to form the basis for our understanding of great power competition, especially in regions such as Central Asia, which represents a focal point for the various geopolitical strategies employed by major powers, such as China and Russia (Mirza & Ayub, 2022).

### **Historical Applications and Reinterpretations**

During the 20th Century Mackinder’s theory was used to rationalize and explain the actions of both geopolitical actors and geostrategic decision-makers. Mackinder’s theory was used to rationalize the actions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe during World War Two. Following World War Two, the United States’ use of Mackinder’s theory evolved into a containment strategy that viewed the Heartland as an area dominated by Communists. The resource-political aspects of Mackinder’s theory were also illustrated through the “Mackinder Paradox,” whereby control of the mineral-rich areas bordering the Indian Ocean was directly linked to control of the Heartland and the subsequent decline of both British and American hegemonic influence. This transformation of the conceptualization of geopolitics emphasized a transition from the sole focus on territory, to one that included resource control and economic leverage. As early as the 1920s, Karl Haushofer, a German geopolitician utilized Mackinder’s “pivot area” concept developed in 1904 and transformed it from a dystopian view to a utopian justification for the development of German global power. The subsequent interest by the United States in Mackinder’s theories, in the 1940s was influenced by Haushofer’s work (Dan, 2024).

Following the end of the Cold War, the theory experienced significant reinterpretation as unipolarity shifted to multipolarity. Many scholars recognized that the theory was being applied in many different forms of government, and thus was a key factor in shaping U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia, and in developing Russian strategies in Eurasia. For example, Alexander Dugin’s neo- Eurasianism reimagined the Heartland as a means to counterbalance the influence of Atlanticist sea powers, and advocated for a “dispersal” model in which multiple centres of power challenge the dominance of Western nations. The examples above illustrate the adaptability of the theory, which has evolved from a binary land-sea dichotomy to include the ideological and economic components of geopolitical competition. The continued examination of the relevance of Mackinder’s theory is now being extended to understand the implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative fundamentally change the nature of Eurasian connectivity and challenges traditional maritime trade routes by establishing new land-based trade routes (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). Furthermore, the current conflict in Ukraine serves to underscore the continued salience of the Heartland in modern geopolitics, as it represents a critical point at which the struggle for influence over the Heartland continues (Singh, 2020).

### **Relevance in the 21st-Century Multipolar World**

Mackinder’s Heartland theory is becoming increasingly relevant due to the emergence of the 21st Century’s multipolar world order which will include two new Heartland powers — China and India. China’s Belt and Road Initiative is an example of how a modern version of Mackinder’s theory can be applied by creating a network of land-based and maritime routes from the Pacific Ocean across the Heartland of Asia to the Mediterranean Sea; thereby weakening the sea-power encirclement that was traditionally used by major powers to contain the Heartland. The BRI also serves to create influence on behalf of China in Central Asia and on the Indian Ocean rim, thus serving the purposes outlined by Dugin of establishing multiple geopolitical poles and simultaneously countering the traditional form of containment of the Heartland via rimland control as described in Mackinder’s writings regarding rimland control.

Russia continues to demonstrate an ongoing interest in maintaining its control over the territory of what it considers to be its Heartland, as evidenced by Russia’s continued involvement in both Eastern Europe and Central Asia; a strategy that serves to protect Russia from external influences (O’Hara & Heffernan, 2006). This sustained engagement serves to illustrate that Russia

views the acquisition and maintenance of control over important territories in Eurasia as being necessary to its national security and to its ability to exert geopolitical influence (Megoran & Sharapova, 2005).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict provides another example of how Mackinder's theories are still applicable today as Russia seeks to establish and maintain access to the Heartland and to prevent NATO's eastward expansion into this same region. The current emphasis upon Ukraine as part of the "inner crescent" or the area that represents a perpetual source of conflict between the Heartland and the rimland reflects Mackinder's long-standing prediction of conflict arising from this friction between these two types of powers.

In the context of the emerging multipolar world, India is emerging as one of the most significant players in terms of influencing the relationships between the various actors in Eurasia. As India's role in the Eurasian Heartland becomes more prominent, the nature of alliances in the region will begin to evolve.

Technologically advanced tools, including cyber capabilities and space-based assets, provide new means for the Heartland to be controlled, and therefore represent a complication to the theoretical framework outlined by Mackinder. However, despite these technological innovations, the fundamental geographic tenets of Mackinder's theories, particularly the central position of Central Asia, remain relevant to the study of contemporary international relations (Chen & Fazilov, 2018).

Central Asia remains an area of strategic significance, given its position as the nexus point of European and Asian continents, and therefore continues to attract the attention of international actors interested in gaining influence in the region (Mahmud & Hossain, 2025).

Finally, changes resulting from climate change and resource depletion have altered the definitions of the Heartland, and as such, now incorporate Arctic routes, and areas in Africa. These changes reflect a "return of the Heartland," and as such, make Mackinder's ideas even more relevant than they were previously to explain great-power competition (A. & A., 2025).

### **Critiques and Modern Adaptations**

Although Mackinder's Heartland Theory is very influential, there are many criticisms regarding the theories assumptions of geographic determinism and Eurocentric views (Megoran & Sharapova, 2005) that detractors believe Mackinder was too reliant upon territorial geography when he failed to account for the increasing impact of globalization and the reduction of geographic barriers due to advancements in air power, cyber capabilities and climate change which have reduced the heartlands perceived protection from invasion (A. & A., 2025). Additionally, Mackinders reliance on Mercator projections has distorted Western perceptions of the centrality of Eurasia and has marginalized non-Western perspectives on the issue resulting in demands for more inclusive and fairer methods of representing Eurasia in today's geopolitics (Mahmud & Hossain, 2025).

Adaptations to the original theory have addressed both of the above criticisms by including humanistic perspectives on the heartland and highlighting the heartlands connections to the global community and thus redefining it as a dynamic geopolitical area influenced by democratic ideals, international trade and multipolar cooperation instead of strictly adhering to deterministic principles (Megoran & Sharapova, 2005). For example, the inclusion of Rimland theory with Mackinders, along with prior examples of the "great game" such as China's belt and road initiative demonstrates how multipolar cooperation can occur when nations share a common interest in creating a more connected Eurasia (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). In US foreign policy, Mackinders Heartland theory has been used to justify Central Asian engagement to counter the influence of the former Soviet Union, however, the increasing multipolarity of the world as seen in the current Russian buffer strategy in Ukraine and in the friction between NATO and Russia have led to the need for a more nuanced and multilateral approach to the heartland theory (Singh, 2020; O'Hara & Heffernan, 2006). This evolution of the heartland theory, which addresses the criticism of eurocentrism by using multiple non-western perspectives, and addresses the criticism of spatial barriers being diminished by globalization (A. & A., 2025; Mahmud & Hossain, 2025), will allow the heartland theory to be effective in meeting the challenges of the 21st century, such as dispersed alliances, non-state actors and changes to the landscape due to climate change.

### **Conclusion**

The Heartland Theory of Mackinder is still viable today as a multipolar theoretical model for understanding the dynamics of a 21st century multipolar world due to its ability to be reinterpreted for modern issues such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Economic Corridors and the contest for resources in the contested crescent regions. The Heartland Theory needs to move past the determinism of earlier geographic theories to include how technological, environmental and ideologic changes are shaping this new competitive/cooperative environment. The Heartland Theory represents an area of competition/ cooperation between poles rather than the dominance by one pole. Therefore, future research on the Heartland Theory should consider hybrid approaches that will allow the theory to remain relevant in both policy-making circles and in the academic study of geopolitics.

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