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**APPLICATION OF MACKINDER'S HEARTLAND THEORY TO  
PAST AND PRESENT GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

Today, the prevailing political discourse revolves around one concept – geopolitics. The concept was first introduced by Sir Halford J. Mackinder - the founding father of modern geopolitics, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His contribution to the study of international relations has been revived in recent years, as his work on the Heartland theory still provides insight and accurate explanation of geopolitics of the Eurasian continent. Mackinder's theory suggests that the Heartland's geographical position at the core of Eurasia provides the state influencing the region with the geographic, strategic and geo-economic advantage over its adversaries. The historic Russian dominance over the Heartland, combined with the its super-power status, offers compelling evidence to Mackinder's theory. The Russian empire, however, faced numerous challengers in its dominion over the Heartland, particularly Central Asia. The British and Ottoman empires in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, severely threatened Russian hegemony in Central Asia and thus the entirety of the Heartland during the prolonged competition for influence referred to as the Great Game. In the contemporary world, too, is Russia forced to protect its hegemony in Central Asia against external influence as part of the New Great Game, although the distinct conditions of the global order shape the conflict in a



vastly different manner. Hence, the particular circumstance of the newly independent states, the revision of main actors in the region, as well as the evolved strategies of domination, Mackinder's Heartland theory still provides an appropriate understanding of this competition. After all, "When everyone is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Heartland Theory**

Revived only recently, the geopolitical approach to international relations was as a modern concept first formulated by Sir Halford John Mackinder in a 1904 paper, appropriately titled the Geographic Pivot of History. Influenced by the gradual decline of British imperialism, as well as both world wars, Mackinder continued to develop his geographical approach to power relations and politics, finally formulating the Heartland theory in 1943. The highly particular circumstances of his time are reflected in the context of the theory; however, it remains the fundamental concept in modern geopolitics.

The Heartland theory develops the notion of the world as a closed system in which existing powers, states, and peoples no longer live independently and in isolation from one another. Instead, they continually interact and thus influence events far beyond own borders<sup>2</sup>. The fluidity of global interactions is reflected clearly in the projection of Old World's power far beyond the historic borders of Europe and the Near East. Colonialism and imperialism

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Edwards 2003.

<sup>2</sup>East 1950, Hess 2004.



defined the asymmetric power relations that regulate physical borders of varying powers, however, contemporary globalized world similarly demonstrates inter-state influences. Mackinder theorized that “the actual balance of political power and 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... and organization of competing peoples.”<sup>3</sup>

Mackinder developed his theory based on the permanent geographical realities such as flora and fauna, related population density, resources, as well as topographic elements. He aimed to derive historic generalizations founded on the causal role of geography<sup>4</sup>, which resulted in the formulation of the Heartland theory as a struggle for power between continental and maritime powers. Due to the great economic and technological developments, state power cannot be projected merely across oceans, but may now span economically and militarily across any land mass. Declining maritime powers such as the British Empire are therefore challenged by traditionally continental states, namely the Russian empire. While Mackinder underestimated the growing U.S. power and global influence due to its sea-power classification, his emphasis on the crucial role of technology in state power and geopolitics corresponds to the contemporary conditions of modern warfare, as well as communications. “Mackinder’s 1904 description of Eurasia as *the geographical pivot of history* emerged at a critical moment ... and can be seen as a clear and succinct summary of existing geo-strategic ideas embellished by new geo-economic considerations”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Mackinder 1904, 437.

<sup>4</sup>Mackinder 1904.

<sup>5</sup>O’Hara and Heffernan 2006, 55.



Additionally, Mackinder's *pivot area* was characterized as a vast region in Eurasia with geographic advantages such as rich natural resources, as well as natural security from any sea-power. Any state controlling this region was a *pivot state* with the ability to disrupt existing global power relations at the expense of maritime powers<sup>6</sup>. Mackinder referred to this *pivot region* as the Heartland, covering the core of the World Island –the latter consisting of the Eurasian continent and Africa. The Heartland includes the Slavic East Europe, considered a distinct entity from West Europe and spanning from the middle of present-day Germany to Volgograd, as well as present-day Russia and Central Asia<sup>7</sup>.

The Heartland is surrounded by the Inner Crescent, consisting of continental West Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as well as the Outer Crescent, consisting of the Americas, the UK, Africa and Australia<sup>8</sup>. Again basing his historic narrative on geographic elements, Mackinder proposed that “all the settled margins of the Old World sooner or later felt the expansive force of mobile power originating from the steppe”.<sup>9</sup>

The Heartland theory theorizes precisely of this geopolitical expansionism stemming from steppe – the Heartland. Hence, Mackinder's main thesis stipulates three crucial conditions for a unipolar global dominance: *Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the World*<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Weigert 1945, Hess 2004.

<sup>7</sup>East 1950.

<sup>8</sup>Weigert 1945.

<sup>9</sup>Mackinder 1904, 430.

<sup>10</sup>Mackinder 1943, East 1950.



### **Who rules the Heartland?**

Tsarist Russia, spanning across East Europe and North Asia, was according to Mackinder in a unique position; by 1904 when Mackinder first wrote about the concept of the Heartland and the pivot area, Russian (East European) political and economic domination over the Heartland has already been fully established<sup>11</sup>. In light of the changing world order after his first work on the Heartland theory in 1904, Mackinder continually developed the concept until 1943. The circumstances of both world wars confirmed his assertions. Russia was both in the past as in present day, with its East European capital, vast territory, and Slavic cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics considered the most powerful state in East Europe.

Following the World War I, Allied attempts to overthrow the 1917 Bolshevik regime in Russia demonstrated the importance of Russian domination in East Europe<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, World War II and Axis' expansionism into the Heartland via East Europe by Germany, as well as via East Asia by Japan, demonstrate the struggle for power among the state dominating the Heartland and those located in the Inner Crescent. The Cold War, too, underlines the importance of influence over East Europe in global politics<sup>13</sup>. Although Mackinder underestimated the extent of U.S. power rise and the scope of modern warfare which surpasses the duality of maritime and continental powers, his premise remains confirmed.

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<sup>11</sup>East 1950, Chowdhury and Hel Kafi 2015.

<sup>12</sup>Riasanovsky, Raëff, Vodovozov, and Hosking 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Labban 2009.



In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the geopolitical discussions of international relations in East Europe focus on the struggle for influence between the Atlantic alliance (referring to NATO, as well as the broader West European-North American multilateralism), and Russia – the continental power. The imperial and Soviet legacies continually reaffirm Russia’s status as the principle nemesis of the Anglo-American alliance, as the cycle of numerous ‘restarts’ and hostile acts continues to guide great-power relations. Furthermore, the recurring failure of such struggles between maritime and continental powers, or the Anglo-American alliance and the Russian dominated Heartland, reaffirms the relevance of Mackinder’s thesis<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, the historic expansionism from the Heartland is reflected in tsarist Russian imperialism, the Soviet Union, as well as contemporary Russian foreign policy. Although the post-Soviet order in Central Asia allowed for the diversification of stakeholders in the region, namely the USA, China, Turkey and Iran, the fact remains that Russian influence cannot be underestimated<sup>15</sup>. The consolidation of Russian state borders around most of the Heartland provide it with a *pivotal* position in Eurasia, from which it can project power onto Scandinavia, Central Asia, East European countries, Turkey, Iran and even India<sup>16</sup>.

Correspondingly, geopolitical approach to the global order was revived after the Soviet dissolution and adapted to accommodate for the modern struggle for the expansion of spheres of influence via multilateral institutions such as the EU/NATO or EEU/CSTO. Both the actors and their strategies described in Mackinder’s Heartland theory remain highly

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14Weigert 1945.

15Labban 2009.

16Weigert 1945.



relevant in the global order, however, modern conditions of politics in the international arena stimulated the development of the theory to include neo-imperial policies of global superpowers and the geo-economic approach to international relations.

### **Central Asia as core of the Heartland**

One of the key elements of Mackinder's theory, that is after more than a century again witness to an external power struggle, is Central Asia – the core of the Heartland. Central Asia – present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – served as a backdrop against which Mackinder formulated the Heartland theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century based on its historic role as an arena for competition among empires. Central Asia's role as the chessboard on which the British and Russian empires played 'the Great Game', as well as its contemporary economic, political and security significance allow for the application of the Heartland theory in examining the motivations, strategies, and (conceivable) outcomes of such struggles.

Central Asia's geographical location at the core of the Heartland has throughout history demonstrated a source of great strategic importance – 'the vast zone of Central Asia had long been the geographical pivot of history and would remain the pivot of the world's politics'<sup>17</sup>. Populated by ethnically diverse nomadic peoples without established political institutions of governance, it was first integrated under external domination with the Hun

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<sup>17</sup>Chowdhury and Hel Kafi 2015, 58.



empire, followed by a cycle of various geopolitical actors<sup>18</sup>. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it responded with little resistance to initial Russian ‘*pivot*’ and the advance across Siberia. Almost immediately, tsarist Russia encountered a challenger and was forced to negotiate with the Mongol empire for control over the steppe. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic Russians transferred their focus from East Europe to achieve domination over key areas of the Heartland under the Russian empire – Central Asia and Central Caucasus<sup>19</sup>.

Soon after, Russia’s imperial aspirations presented yet another opponent, resulting in the intense political and economic competition between the Russian and British empires, known as the Great Game. Furthermore, Russian influence over the Heartland was challenged by the Ottoman empire, whose geopolitical tactics relied on the use of ideological ties with the Heartland to underpin its physical expansionism.

### **The Great Game in Central Asia**

The Great Game was the greatest political competition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the two world’s largest powers – the maritime British empire and the continental Russian empire struggled to control the future of Central Asia. “It was a struggle for political dominance, control and security, conducted by two imperial powers over land and populations whose value lay in their location between the Russian and British Empires”<sup>20</sup>. Most importantly, however, the stakes were high; Russian Southward expansionism through Central Asia generated serious British insecurities concerning the security of the crown jewel of its empire.

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18Hambly, Smith and Sinor 2017.

19Ismalov and Papava 2010.

20Edwards 2003, 84.





Tsarist Russia's control of Central Asia undermined the British empire in numerous ways, namely by undercutting its geopolitical and economic goals.

Firstly, in accordance with Mackinder's geopolitical approach, Central Asia was seen as the gateway into Afghanistan, and the latter to India<sup>21</sup>. From the British perspective, Central Asia served as a buffer zone that protected the Indian colony and by extension the empire as a whole. Furthermore, "the Russian Empire in Central Asia was impregnable"<sup>22</sup>. Russia extended a vast railway network into the region, which enabled it to project power across entire Eurasia. In doing so, its war-making capacity increased exponentially, as it was able to deliver manpower and resources to the new frontier. Unlike Russia's continental power, the British navy had no means of accessing the region quickly and efficiently.

As the main manner of retaining control of the pivot area, influence over the previously mentioned Inner Crescent (West Europe, Middle East, Asia Minor, Southeast Asia) was crucial<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, Russian efforts to protect its influence over the Heartland could be seen in its expansionist tendencies beyond Central Asia, targeting primarily Afghanistan, Persia and Constantinople. The asymmetry of power resulting from technological advancements was further exacerbated with Russian friendly relationship with the Persian shah – a threat to the security of coastal regions on which the British navy depended, Afghan hostility towards the British that drew the British empire into two wars, as well as Russian persistence in gaining influence over Constantinople and its straits. Expansionism in Central

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<sup>21</sup>Cooley.

<sup>22</sup>O'Hara and Hefferman 2006, 60.

<sup>23</sup>Ismalov and Papava 2010.



Asia thus “upset the balance of power by making Russia much stronger than the other European powers”<sup>24</sup> and was ultimately oriented at invading India.

Secondly, Central Asia’s economic potential contributed to the geopolitical importance of the region. Region’s production of cotton, for example, was utilized to undermine U.S. influence in West Europe, while the expansive railway system interrupted established British patterns of trade. Knowledge of the vast natural resources such as minerals, coal and oil spread as early as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was only in 1910 that Central Asia “gained considerable importance as the source of energy to fuel Britain’s industrial development and as such had considerable geo-economic importance”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, in accordance with the Heartland theory, control over vast resources in Central Asia was important to facilitate the continual projection of economic and consequently political power of the regional hegemon. Thus, British policy towards Central Asia intended not only to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire, but to ensure its future security in economic and political spheres.

The geo-economic importance of Central Asian resources, namely oil, was intensified to a matter of global security starting with World War I, as concern over German or Turkish access to region’s oil resources grew. This was especially so in light of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, which weakened Russian control over Central Asia and could allow German or Turkish assumption of power in the region, thus ensuring a continual supply of

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<sup>24</sup>Fromkin 1980.

<sup>25</sup>O’Hara and Heffernan 2006, 62.



resources for waging war in Europe. Just as Mackinder suggested, “the geopolitical actor that dominated the Heartland would possess the necessary geopolitical and economic potential to ultimately control the World Island and the planet”<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, British dependence on U.S. oil prompted its objective in securing its own, independent supply<sup>27</sup>. Hence, despite the Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907, which nominally settled colonial disputes in Central Asia between the two empires<sup>28</sup>, control over the region remained a central concern.

### **Pan-Turanist agenda in Central Asia**

Central Asia was not only an arena of competition for influence between the British and Russian empire; due to the Pan-Turanist ideology it also provoked interventionism of the Ottoman empire, albeit less successful than that of the British. Pan-Turanist inspiration for Ottoman Central Asia policy thus serves as an ideological aspect of the Great Game.

Pan-Turanism was a call for Turkish unity within a single state – Turan, perceived as the ‘third political ideology’ based on a common ethnic heritage, linguistic group and culture<sup>29</sup>. The historic legacy that facilitated the development of Pan-Turkic efforts was based on 300 years of uninterrupted Turkic domination in the Heartland, concluded with the Ottoman empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the incursion of Slavs<sup>30</sup>. This process, however, was gradual, starting with Russian intent to gain control over Crimea, Constantinople and its

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26Ismailov and Papava 2010, 85.

27O’Hara and Heffernan 2006.

28Fromkin 1980.

29Hostler 1957, Hostler 1993.

30Ismailov and Papava 2010.



straits, Armenia<sup>31</sup>, as well as Central Asia. The area was traditionally known as Turan (also Turkestan), as it contained the areas populated by ethnic Turkic peoples; Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kirghiz, Turkmen and Kara-Kalpaks. Turan was considered a subcontinent of its own; “the last bastion of independent Eastern Turkish states which were conquered by Russia”<sup>32</sup>. It was during this time, as the Ottoman empire still controlled strategically important areas in the Heartland, that the Pan-Turanist (sometimes referred to as Pan-Turkic) ideas were first developed.

Pan-Turanism, combined with the nationalist stance of the Ottoman government, chiefly prompted the Ottoman empire to enter World War I. In light of the encroachment of European powers – primarily the British and Russian empire, in Central Asia, the Young Turk’s government utilized Pan-Turanism to justify its aims: “Pan-Turanism is chiefly an enemy of Russia. Russia although a great power, is not invincible”<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the central Ottoman objective at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lied in accordance with Mackinder’s theory; the main geopolitical strategy was to expand control from the Inner Crescent to Central Asia in the Heartland at Russian expense, which would allow for a Russian definitive retreat from the region. Although justified in an ideological manner – through Pan-Turanism, the core of Pan-Turanism certainly carried geopolitical connotations, as uniting all Turkish peoples within one state would create a new global power of Central Asia and Asia Minor. In such a way, national ideologies serve as one of the driving forces of geopolitics.

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31Hostler 1957, Hostler 1993.

32Hostler 1957, 47.

33Hostler 1957.



1914 presented itself as an opportunity for a decisive Ottoman step against the tsarist Russia especially after the Russian-Japanese War of 1904, which resulted in “the moral and political defeat of Russia”<sup>34</sup>, perceived by Turks as a solution to their quandary. The conflict was the first instance when a smaller, maritime power of the Inner Crescent was able to successfully challenge the Russian empire and force it to retreat from Korea and Manchuria. Inspired by Japanese retaking of parts of the Heartland, as well as the Anglo-Russian entente of 1907 that highlighted the decline in Russian power, the Ottoman empire started to pursue expansionist policies in Central Asia more decisively, including entry into the World War a decade later. Its bombings of Russian Black Sea Ports and advances on the Caucasus front in Armenia and Azerbaijan successfully challenged the Russian empire in the Heartland<sup>35</sup>, however, Central Asia after a brief period of independence following the Bolshevik revolution remained firmly in the hands of the USSR.

Not unlike tsarist Russia, the Ottoman empire was dissolved in 1918 and never able to regain control of Central Asia. The Pan-Turanist “great political federation ... extending from Hungary eastward to the Pacific Ocean,”<sup>36</sup> was never realized and the Soviet Union maintained the ‘traditional’ Russian control over the Heartland.

Thus, after World War I, control over East Europe and the Heartland lied firmly in Soviet hands. This, in accordance with Mackinder, led to Soviet immense influence over the World Island – in the bipolar world that lasted until 1991, the USSR controlled the vast

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34Hostler 1957.

35Royde-Smith and Showalter 2018.

36Shaw and Yapp 2018.



majority of the globe, facing a challenger only in the perpetual Mackinderian adversary – the American maritime power.

### **The Heartland in the contemporary global order**

The consolidation of Russian control over the Heartland peaked during the Cold War, when détente between the two superpowers facilitated their autonomy and independence in their respective spheres of influence. Soviet Socialist Republics in Central Asia were established in 1920s and 1930s in an effort to prevent the spread of Pan-Turanism which, although being discredited globally after World War I and dissolution of the Ottoman empire, remained the main ideology to which the peoples of Central Asia related<sup>37</sup>. Instead of establishing borders among S.S.R.s according to historic borders between the autonomous Bukhara and Khiva, and Turkestan, as previously imposed by the tsarist rule, the Soviets divided the region irrespective of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and historic elements<sup>38</sup>. The resulting S.S.R.s diminished the threat of Pan-Turanism, as they interrupted existing links among the peoples of Central Asia.

After the dissolution of the USSR, the five newly independent states inherited this division. Initially, the end of the Soviet ‘empire’ and Yeltsin’s policy of divorce signified the end of Russian rule over Central Asia. The end of the consolidated Russian rule facilitated external powers’ gradual expansion into the region despite the legacy of Russian influence.

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<sup>37</sup>Hostler 1993.

<sup>38</sup>Allworth and Sinor 2017, Fierman 2012.



Furthermore, the power asymmetry that resulted from the economic, social and political instability and backwardness of the Central Asian states allowed for the growth of dependency relations with states outside of the Heartland, namely the U.S.

Despite the transformation of the global order that occurred in the 1990s and a shift away from imperialism and overseas spheres of influence, Mackinder's Heartland theory remains applicable to the examination of international relations, especially in Central Asia. The geopolitics of the contemporary world, however, differ from the geopolitics of Mackinder's time. The renaissance of geopolitics thus requires an adaptation of the Heartland theory in accordance with modern conditions, often described as the New Great Game— the concept of competition in influence, power, hegemony and profits in Central Asia<sup>39</sup>.

### **The New Great Game in Central Asia**

A distinct contemporary geopolitical space has emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which replaced traditional empires with nation states. Instead of the British empire or the USSR, the U.S. has emerged in their place as the global hegemon in a unipolar world. New international norms arose simultaneously, which assert the sovereignty of nations and the preeminence of democratic and liberal values globally. The new political consensus is promoted by multilateral institutions such as the UN, EU, WTO, or IMF, which assumed an important role in influencing international relations and shaping the modern global order, despite promoting

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<sup>39</sup>Edwards 2003.



exclusively Western values. A result of such a transformation is significant; unlike in the past, the international community has no tolerance for violations of sovereignty, aggression or excessive control. “The geopolitics of contemporary Central Asia will thus be qualitatively different from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Game”<sup>40</sup>.

In accordance with such a shift, Mackinder’s objective geopolitics have been supplemented by the notion of hybrid geopolitics which encompass processes of economic, military and ideological expansionism and competition<sup>41</sup>. Additionally, the natural inclination of great powers to maximize their power has resulted in the strong emphasis on geo-economics, since the political control or influence on energy resources of Central Asia indicate more than merely the pursuit of energy resources<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, the (hybrid) geopolitical significance of Central Asia – the Heartland, includes energy security, economic integration, a buffer-zone and platform for military projection in the war on terror, ideological promotion etc.

Despite this plurality of interests, the nature of the competition remained the same and Central Asia still serves as an arena for the competition for influence, whether it is economic, political or ideological. This plurality of interests is, however, accompanied with a plurality of stakeholders in Central Asia, as the British, Russian and Ottoman empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were replaced with the USA (specifically, the Anglo-American alliance), Russia, Turkey, China, Iran, India, as well as Central Asian states themselves<sup>43</sup>. The geopolitical competition

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40Edwards 2003, 91.

41Edwards 2003, Labban 2009.

42Iseri 2009.

43Menelly 2016.





and modern power projection in Central Asia can be characterized from three main angles: overseas air bases (stemming from the war on terror), energy dependency (stemming from the need for economic integration), and ideological influence (stemming from Eurasianism and liberalism). In order to maximize their power in the Heartland, all stakeholders must employ varying combinations of the three. “None of these goals necessarily conflict with each other, but they all rely on overlapping partnerships with nations whose geographic placement continues to be a blessing and a curse”<sup>44</sup>.

As the legacy of the Great Game continues to define geostrategic aims for Central Asia in the New Great Game, the Heartland theory remains an appropriate explanation for the phenomenon. “The Heartland is no longer a gateway to potential colonies for the United Kingdom and Russia, but a tactical springboard for 21<sup>st</sup> century power projection in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and South Asia”<sup>45</sup>. The Heartland theory has therefore continued to influence the discourse, however, under the evolving conditions of the world order a variety of interpretations and uses of the theory has emerged. Most significantly, Mackinder’s critique of super-power competition gave rise to Eurasianism in Russia, which inspired neo-imperial, nationalist attitudes and policies. On the other hand, the Heartland theory also serves as a foundation for the U.S. ‘grand strategy’, which acknowledged the “stopping power of the sea”<sup>46</sup> in projecting influence globally, and thus facilitated the shift in U.S. policy from global hegemony to the prevention of regional hegemony.

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44Menelly 2016, 38.

45Menelly 2016, 36-37.

46Iseri 2009.



In sum, “the perceived wisdom is that the New Great Game ... is multifaceted, covering a range of sectors from economic to social and cultural and questions of hard security, with a variety of actors playing the game in a variety of geographical areas”<sup>47</sup>.

### **The U.S. New Great Game**

The U.S. grand strategy has for decades been oriented at establishing the U.S. global hegemony. Unfortunately, Mackinder’s maritime-continental power deficiencies (to a limited extent) still constrain U.S. policy making. Although American troops may with the aid of modern technology invade anywhere, the ‘stopping power of sea’ constrains the permanent projection of U.S. military power in Eurasia. As a consequence, “the U.S. policy-making elites ... have been preparing their strategies to prevent emergence of regional hegemonies that have the potential to challenge U.S. grand strategy”<sup>48</sup>. Instead of spreading U.S. influence too thin throughout the world, this shift in strategy indicates that prevention of regional hegemonies may be sufficient for the natural preservation of U.S. global hegemony. Thus, U.S. interests in Central Asia, aiming to limit Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Iranian and Indian influence and rise to regional hegemony prove crucial for U.S. geopolitical objectives. Yet again, whoever commands the Heartland commands the World Island.

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<sup>47</sup>Edwards 2003, 87.

<sup>48</sup>Isseri 2009, 28.



In Mackinder's time, only empires bordering the disputed region had the capacity and interest in extending their influence beyond their borders. In the globalized world, however, power projection is no longer limited geographically. Today, global powers are capable of establishing military bases worldwide. "The overseas airbase is the currency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century power projection. ... Just as Russia and Britain populated Central Asia with forts and garrisons in earlier times, 21<sup>st</sup> century powers have brought air bases to Central Asia"<sup>49</sup>. However, the establishment of military bases also serves aims other than mere military assertiveness – one of the main motives is the economic integration that necessarily accompanies foreign military presence, as well as political influence, especially in rent-seeking countries with weaker democratic institutions, as is the case in Central Asia. Such an approach to hybrid geopolitics aiming to limit regional hegemony is evident in the U.S. case and can also be noticed in Indian and Russian bases in Central Asia.

While it is often assumed that the U.S. interest in Central Asia stems merely from war on terror, the U.S. 'grand strategy' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires also the extension of geo-economic integration and multilateral cooperation<sup>50</sup> as part of hybrid geopolitics in the Heartland.

Evidence points precisely in this direction, as the shift in U.S. strategy took place as early as in mid-1990s and remained constant in peace-time and war-time alike. Rather than being influenced by the war on terror, the events of 9/11 validated U.S. military and

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<sup>49</sup>Menelly 2016, 37.

<sup>50</sup>Labban 2009, Isseri 2009.



interventionist outlook concerning Central Asia<sup>51</sup>. Early American interest in military presence in the Heartland took place through multilateral projects, namely expansion of NATO into East Europe, NATO-sponsored Partnership for Peace program, as well as the Central Asian Battalion under the UN guidance and with a peacekeeping purpose. After 2001, however, the importance of Central Asia strengthened, as it was yet again perceived as a buffer zone, this time protecting Central Asia and U.S. interests there from Jihadist expansionism<sup>52</sup>. It simultaneously facilitated U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and later Iraq, therefore ensuring its long-term commitment to regional stability.

Alternatively, U.S. military presence in the Heartland was supplemented with business interests, specifically energy companies and commercial interests of the military-industrial complex. The aim of increasing the geo-economic security of the U.S. required some degree of American influence on Central Asian countries, since their extractive industries were susceptible to the general economic backwardness of the region and thus extremely volatile and sensitive to external pressures<sup>53</sup>. Furthermore, growing American dependency on energy from the Gulf has rendered energy security an issue of national interest. Both in the past and today, “the political goal of the U.S. government is to prevent energy transportation unification among industrial zones of Japan, Korea, China, Russia and the EU in the Eurasian landmass and ensure the flow of regional energy resources to US-led international oil markets”<sup>54</sup>.

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51Labban 2009.

52Hess 2004.

53Batsaikhan and Dabrowski 2017.

54Iseri 2009, 35.



In sum, American involvement in the New Great Game is multifaceted and encompasses many interests varying from geo-economic to security interests. In light of the wide-spread criticism of U.S. policies as neo-imperialist (likely supported by Mackinder), the incursion of Anglo-American and West European multilateral institutions into the Heartland with the objective of spreading democracy and liberalism, providing development funds, and facilitating progress, provided great utility to the ideological and cultural war that accompanies the (hybrid) geopolitical competition in the Heartland. Yet, the U.S. involvement induces much less need for ideological justification, since the modern international norms underwrite U.S. superpower status and provide a shield for the mentioned criticism. This, however, is not the case for Russia.

### **Russian New Great Game**

“Russian foreign policy is more consistently anchored in a grand strategy in the Mackinderian mode towards an area that Moscow considers its own backyard”<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, Russian policy of maintaining a sphere of influence in Central Asia is more reliant on the traditional Mackinder’s emphasis on military power. Consequently, the need for a continuation of the Soviet military legacy facilitated the extension of Russian military presence into the 2000s. The focus on terrorism and NATO containment are the main sources of Russian geopolitical thinking. Russian military bases in the Heartland are located in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, whereas further military cooperation is as a reflection

<sup>55</sup>Hess 2004, 100.



to Western multilateralism in economic, political and military affairs codified in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Collective Security Treaty Organization<sup>56</sup>.

In addition to the continuation of Soviet military presence in the Heartland, Russia also considers energy potential of Central Asia as an attractive source of political and economic power – not stemming from the ensured supply, but from the transfer of Central Asian oil. Since Central Asian countries have no access to sea, they must transmit their energy extractions to international markets through numerous transit countries, the most suitable of which is Russia. This notion is of course enthusiastically supported by Moscow, which “considers maintaining its economic monopoly over the flow of Caspian energy resources would lead Russia not only to gain political leverage over European countries, ... but also regain its political dominance over the newly independent countries”<sup>57</sup>. Thus, by controlling the Heartland, Russia could indirectly maximize its influence in the whole of Europe.

In addition to the economic cooperation in the energy field, Russia started to pursue broader economic integration. Because it recognized the threat of EU, Chinese or India’s markets, Moscow moved to secure multilateral and cooperative agreements with states of Central Asia in order to consolidate the predominance of Russian businesses in the region<sup>58</sup>.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most important feature of Russian foreign policy towards the Heartland is neither military nor economic. Instead, the ideology of Eurasianism gained wide-spread popularity and influence of political elites in the Kremlin. Eurasianism, which

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<sup>56</sup>Menelly 2016.

<sup>57</sup>Iseri 2009.

<sup>58</sup>Labban 2009.



emerged among Russian emigres in Western Europe in the 1920s, was strongly influenced by Mackinder's Heartland theory. After the Eurasianist revival in the 1990s, Mackinder is once again praised as the most important academic in international relations.

Eurasionism unified the Heartland theory with traditional notions of Russian nationalism. According to Dugin, Russian chief nationalist, "the Eurasian Empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, the strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate"<sup>59</sup>. This demonstrates the unification of the objective Mackinder's concepts with the ideology of Russian nationalism; not only does modern Eurasionism contain the past struggle between maritime and continental powers as described in the Heartland theory and applied to the Atlantic (e.g. Anglo-American) antagonism oriented at Russia, but also the merger of the neo-imperialist calls for a Eurasian empire with the highly subjective notions of Russian uniqueness and superiority. Thus, Eurasionism puts forth the notion of a Eurasian Heartland as the source of anti-Atlanticism<sup>60</sup>, from which U.S. influence would be forced to retreat. As such, the Eurasionist ideology drives the Russian reliance on geopolitics.

The portrayal of the U.S. as a natural, permanent enemy of the Russian people, and of Russia as a historically, culturally and civilizationally unique state has allowed for the transition of Eurasianism into mainstream political discourse<sup>61</sup>. This serves as an incredibly useful political tool, because it justifies Russian expansionism and aggressiveness. The

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<sup>59</sup>Clover 2016.

<sup>60</sup>Clover 1999.

<sup>61</sup>Clover 2016.



prevalence of new Eurasionism in the Russian legislative branch is reflected in its representation in Zyuganov's Communist Party despite the inherent contradiction between Marxist-Leninist and Eurasionist worldviews, as well as in Zhirinovskiy's LDPR<sup>62</sup>.

Eurasionism as an umbrella ideology that accommodates the Red-Brown coalition in the Russian political arena, as well as inspires the nation who had suffered tremendous loss of national identity and pride in the 1990s therefore holds an important position in Russia's foreign policy. Its perceived superiority to Anglo-American 'democratic imperialism' fulfills the hopes for a strong Russia, able to control the Heartland in the economic and political, but most importantly the ideological manner.

### **The Heartland in the future**

The competition between the USA and Russia for influence over the Heartland is only one of the numerous aspects of the New Great Game. The Central Asian rivalry between Pakistan and India, for example, also highlights the relevance of the Heartland in pursuing their strategic interest<sup>63</sup>. The third subset of the New Great Game may also be the Iranian – Turkish competition for leadership among the Islamic populations of Eurasia<sup>64</sup>. Because of the Heartland's position at the core of Eurasia and the intersection of three distinct components – Europe, Asia and the Middle East, region's geopolitical importance, although different than that initially imagined by Mackinder in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, will likely remain significant for all global or regional powers. While Central Asian countries as a result have

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62Clover 1999.

63Menelly 2016.

64Edwards 2003.





unprecedented potential for pursuing multi-vector policies and extracting maximum benefits from external powers, their balancing act may further undermine regional stability. As long as ‘great power chauvinism’ guides national security objectives of the USA, Russia, and others, the Heartland will remain at the center of global order.

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