
Placing China in America's Strategic 'Pivot' to the Asia-Pacific: The Centrality of Halford Mackinder's Theory

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Introduction

The preeminent power of the last century, the United States, finds itself today at the strategic crossroads. It faces a complex task of putting its domestic fiscal house in order, ensuring long-term economic growth, and, in the military sphere, a critical need to shape a leaner and technologically more advanced joint force for the future. The debate surrounding Washington's relative decline in world politics has gained momentum in recent years with the US housing market crash and resultant economic downturn, which has emboldened its primary challenger—China. This has forced the US to reassess its place on the geo-strategic chessboard in Asia. Based on these dynamic changes, the thematic core of this paper examines the remarkable renaissance of early 20th century geopolitics in certain quarters of the American elite.

Contemporary geo-strategic realities and tectonic shifts in terms of the relative power of major players on the world stage make it essential to understand the role that geography plays in statecraft. Recently, various historical conceptions

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of geo-politics have been enthusiastically taken up by some of the US political and intellectual elite and applied to modern China. Insecurities over imperial decline, the likes of which gripped Britain a century ago, can today be glimpsed in the rhetoric of American politicians, military officials and commentators as they evoke ideas of “geographical pivots”, “heartlands” and “seapower”. These geo-political visions are coming to the fore in debates over America’s national destiny and are having a profound influence on policy formulation. The most fundamental among these is the perception and framing of China’s naval power projection in the South China Sea. This article seeks to elaborate upon an increasingly held view amongst the US elite that East Asia, and, more specifically, the Western Pacific, has become the world’s *new geographical pivot of history*.

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Contextualising the “Geographical Pivot of History” in the Present Day

One of the most eminent historical figures connected to the study of geo-politics is the geographer and champion of the British Empire, Sir Halford Mackinder. “The Geographical Pivot of History,” published in 1904, is perhaps Mackinder’s best known work and was presentiment of many of the global geo-political shifts of the 20th century. Mackinder’s emphasis was on the potential influence of the vast continental area of Eurasia on world history. In order to capture the essence of this rising zone of geo-political power, he coined the term “heartland” to describe what he believed would become a new “geographical pivot of history.” In Mackinder’s conception, the world of 1904 was primarily divided into three great spaces:¹

- The Pivot area, or heartland (represented by Eurasia’s continental interior)
- The Inner Crescent (“a partly continental, partly oceanic” crescent that runs from Western Europe through the Middle East, India and China, and along the Pacific littoral)
- The Outer Crescent (Australia, the Americas, Southern Africa, Britain and Japan)

Mackinder was convinced that the state which controlled this heartland would consolidate space, resources and power until the littoral spaces of Europe and Asia would also be subsumed into the heartland.

In 1904, Mackinder believed that over the preceding few centuries, the opening of the oceans had reversed the fortunes of world history in Europe's favour at the expense of Asia.² However, at the beginning of the 20th century, he saw that railways could open continental Eurasia just as merchant and military ships had opened the way for Britain's vast overseas empire. Mackinder was convinced that the state which controlled this heartland would consolidate space, resources and power until the littoral spaces of Europe and Asia would also be subsumed into the heartland. As the power and territory of the heartland was consolidated

and expanded, over a period of time, land power would surely translate into sea power.³ Much of Mackinder's writings reflected the geo-political realities of the era. The British imperial elite, from which Mackinder came, were preoccupied, if not obsessed, about rising rival powers and maintaining British dominance of the oceans. It is, therefore, not surprisingly that his ideas found a receptive audience amongst an elite desperate not to concede to any state the competitive economic and military advantages that sea power had brought.

However, by the end of World War II, Britain had already relinquished its dominance of the oceans to the United States, and for the better half of the last century, the US gained similar benefits to those enjoyed by imperial Britain. It is interesting to note that this similarity with Britain is not limited to preeminence at sea and amongst a section of America's current political, intellectual and military elite, similar imperial anxieties to those that prevailed in Mackinder's day are being articulated. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the heartland, though this time, instead of Eurasia, the heartland has been dislocated and reconceptualised. Today, China is framed as the geographical pivot of world history and as Loren Thompson of the Lexington Institute, has outlined:

If China comes to dominate the Western Pacific, it will control the industrial *heartland* of the global economy... because the East Asian littoral really has become the center of the global economy... Halford Mackinder may not have gotten the zip codes right, but a century after he propounded the notion of a global *heartland*, it actually exists – with China at its center.⁴ [Emphasis added.]

Robert D Kaplan has also seized upon Mackinder's ideas and he highlights that China's geographical position, given its 9,000-mile temperate coastline with many good natural harbours, makes it destined to be both, a land and sea power.⁵ Kaplan provocatively opened his 2010 article on the "Geography of Chinese Power" in *Foreign Affairs*, with the closing lines of Mackinder's paper:

The English geographer Sir Halford Mackinder ended his famous 1904 article, "The Geographical Pivot of History," with a disturbing reference to China...he posited that the Chinese, should they expand their power well beyond their borders, "might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent."⁶

The message is clear: China is the greatest threat to the current US led world order due to its favourable geography. Kaplan, an avowed geographical determinist, has suggested that the physical contours of East Asia augur a naval century based upon the manner in which geography illuminates and sets priorities.⁷ However, at the dawn of this naval century, Kaplan has also noted that standing in the way of any potential Chinese geo-strategic dominance beyond the East or South China Sea are a few scattered islands: the "first island chain" (the Korean Peninsula, the Kuril Islands, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Australia), and the "second island chain" (including Japan's Ogasawara Islands, and the US territories of Guam and the Northern Marianas Islands). This leads Kaplan to summarise that: "China's answer to feeling so boxed in has been aggressive at times...Still an insecure sea power, it thinks about the ocean territorially."⁸ After China's involvement in a number of incidents and heated exchanges over territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, the US seems set to respond to these challenges towards its allies' sovereignty with demonstrations of military presence and diplomatic subtlety. However, as a recent article in the *Economist* noted, in the event of China not agreeing to pursue its own interests within the liberal world order, it could become more awkward and potentially belligerent.⁹

Obama's Strategic Vision: A Geo-political Pivot to Asia

In an interview to the authoritative *PLA Daily*, Lin Zhiyuan, at the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences, Beijing, stated that the South China Sea is likely to become even more tense owing to the emphasis of the US Navy on Mackinder's "heartland"

theory.¹⁰ This theory when applied in the current Asian context, underscores a strategic shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Intriguingly, the application of Mackinder's heartland theory has not been restricted to policy analysts or commentators. Indeed, in connection with the rise of contemporary China, Mackinder has found his ideas enthusiastically taken up by the likes of Adm Patrick Walsh, commander of the US Pacific Fleet until his retirement at the beginning of 2012. Walsh explicitly referenced Mackinder when he explained that for any country to exert economic, political, diplomatic or military influence beyond its own region, it requires control of, or a sustained presence in, a "strategic pivot."¹¹ Walsh regards the South China Sea as today's strategic pivot and he underscored its criticality when he noted that 70,000 container ships, accounting for approximately \$5 trillion of economic activity, pass through the Strait of Malacca every year.¹² Through the vital sea-lanes of the South China Sea, more than half of the world's shipping traverses, including 23 percent of US trade. As Walsh stressed, "In the Pacific Century, sea power resumes its traditional role in the sea-lines of communication..."¹³

Based on these geo-strategic realities, Walsh has proposed that the US presence in Asia would be best served if the US shifted its strategic focus and forces away from Northeast Asia, to Southeast Asia and specifically to the South China Sea.¹⁴ Using a Mackinderian framework, Walsh insists that whoever controls this sea will exert critical influence over the world and it is in the US interests that this sea can be either kept open for the economic benefit of the United States and its allies, or it can be closed in an operation to dissuade imminent threats from China.¹⁵ Although the Pentagon's strategic vision guidelines released in January 2012 did not mention an earlier classified paper on such a "strategic concept" written by Walsh, it appears that his thinking has been firmly embraced by Washington. When Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, announced in November 2011, the United States' intention to turn to the Pacific, there were tantalising hints of Walsh's and Mackinder's thinking.¹⁶ The very language of Mackinder seemed to resonate in her statement when she stated:

The United States stands at a *pivot* point... We need to accelerate efforts to *pivot* to new global realities... and [t]his kind of *pivot* [to the Asia-Pacific] is not easy, but we have paved the way for it over the past two-and-a-half years."¹⁷ [Emphasis added.]

For the US policy elite, the Western Pacific has emerged as a geographical pivot of history, just as Eurasia was for Mackinder a century ago. As Clinton acknowledged, such recognition demands a significant military rebalancing. She stated in her announcement that the US intends to deploy littoral combat ships to Singapore and the first batch of 200 US Marines landed at the Royal Australian Air Force base in Darwin, Australia, on April 3, 2012. The US Marine presence in Australia defines and provides form to the enhanced defence cooperation between Washington and Canberra, outlined during President Obama's visit to Australia in November 2011. Given that US forces are transitioning out of Iraq and drawing down in Afghanistan, Obama's defence strategic-guidance document announced at the start of 2012 seeks to prioritise goals for the 21st century while attempting to retain global leadership as it reorients towards the Asia-Pacific.¹⁸ Beginning with the primary task of taking part in joint training, the US Marines would eventually constitute a 2,500-strong Marine Air Ground Task Force. Any potential access to Australia's air and naval bases could also be aimed at protecting assets that remain susceptible to anti-access measures by China. Indeed, Washington's strategic vision document has already pronounced that its "rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region" can be read in reference to states such as "China and Iran, continuing to pursue asymmetric means to counter US' power projection capabilities."¹⁹

Tapering Defence Budget

President Obama has proposed a defence budget of \$613.9 billion for the fiscal year 2013. The request for the Department of Defence (DoD) includes \$525.4 billion in discretionary budgetary authority to fund base defence programmes and \$88.5 billion to support overseas contingency operations (OCO), primarily in Afghanistan. The proposed financial year (FY) 2013 budget will ensure that US forces remain capable across the spectrum of missions. The proposed budget applies strategic guidance to force structure and investment. According to Secretary of Defence, Leon Panetta, "This budget plan represents a historic shift to the future, recognising that we are at a strategic point after a decade of war... The plan is aligned to strategic priorities we have identified to keep America safe and maintain the strongest military in the world."²⁰ The senior leadership of the US Defence Department warned Congress that doubling defence spending cuts would leave the military without a workable strategy. US Secretary of Defence and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Martin E Dempsey, during the Congressional budget testimony before the House Appropriations Committee's

Having been engaged in active military combat for over a decade, the US has sought to reassess its military role by identifying America's strategic interests, defence priorities, and spending. It will suffice to mention that the financial crisis and ensuing recession have only added to the urgency of this re-assessment.

Defence Sub-committee, underscored that the new defence strategy is an aggregate of military objectives, available resources, and how to meet those objectives with those resources.²¹

That notwithstanding, having been engaged in active military combat for over a decade, the US has sought to reassess its military role by identifying America's strategic interests, defence priorities, and spending. It will suffice to mention that the financial crisis and ensuing recession have only added to the urgency of this reassessment.²² Substantial cuts in US defence spending were seen as inevitable, more so owing to the Budget Control Act of 2011, which mandated reductions in federal spending. The Pentagon already faces approximately \$487 billion of cuts in planned defence spending during the

course of this decade. However, given Obama's statement before the Australian Parliament, tapered defence spending is unlikely to impact upon the US' military presence and role in the Asia-Pacific. The president stated that the "US is and will be a Pacific power... Reductions in US defence spending will not, I repeat, will not, come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific."²³

Overall, the strategic vision announced by the Obama Administration represents adroit politico-military manoeuvring which seeks to overcome a growing perception in the region that Washington will no longer hold credible leverage against Beijing. Perceptible military muscle-flexing by China highlights the underlying contradictions of China's growing military power and the opacity of its long-term strategic and military orientation and intention. This tension appears to be the primary determinant for Washington to reassess its strategic initiative in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.²⁴

Concluding Observations

As Washington turns a page in its history after two disastrous and simultaneous wars, the question over whether the US' "strategic pivot" will succeed in

establishing American preeminence in the Western Pacific, or whether it will further complicate America's equation with China, and result in increased confrontation, remains to be seen. What is more certain is that America's revised strategic agenda focussing on the Asia-Pacific has been to an extent conceptualised by a rehabilitation of Mackinder's theory of the "geographical pivot of history." This paper has established the enduring legacy of early 20th century geo-politics in perceptions of contemporary regional strategic realities. While the ideas of Mackinder may be powerful rhetorical tools to frame the rise of China, they simultaneously serve to mask the complexities of today's South China Sea. Nevertheless, through such a framing, the US has sought to portray itself as the sole guarantor of security for its Asian allies and to promote its legitimacy as an off-shore balancer against China's hegemony.

For almost half a century now, Asia's tectonic plates of power have shifted to such a degree that the possibility has arisen of China once again returning to its traditional role as Asia's central actor. To achieve this end, Beijing has diligently worked towards attaining "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*) and the accrual of traditional attributes of power. This has resulted in perpetuating the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), sustaining economic growth and development, maintaining domestic political stability, defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing China's status as a great power. As a consequence, China's own diplomacy has steadily grown more omni-directional and proactive, backed by an economy that is an engine of regional growth and a military that is modernising rapidly.²⁵

From the time the concept of "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) was proposed by Zheng Bijian, vice president of the CCP Central Party School, at the Bo Ao Forum for Asia in 2003, this rhetoric, rather than reassuring neighbours, has paved the way for apprehension as China refuses to clarify the current status, or its future vision, for the modernisation and growing preparedness and capability of its military. It appears that behind this there lies not only a matter of expansion of state influence but also China's grand strategy to gradually subvert the "unipolar-type international order" dominated by the US.²⁶ Yet, through China's opacity, the entire debate on the impending "China threat theory" (*Zhongguo weixie lun*) has progressively gained significance both within Asia and further afield. The resultant threat perception, supported by America's geo-political framing of China, has led to a remarkable rehabilitation of America's image, following the catastrophes of Afghanistan and Iraq.

All the states in the region are adjusting their relations towards Beijing, as well as with each other. This implies the creation of a new regional order while, at the same time, the US' "pivot" to the region, signals that America is still likely to guarantee its allies' security in the midst of these geo-political shifts. With the United States being subject to an intensifying threat to its economic and military supremacy, the rise of China seems destined to provide continued angst amongst America's political and intellectual elite over how Washington can ultimately adjust to, and deal with, Beijing in a rapidly changing world order.

Notes

1. Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History (1904)," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4, 2004, p. 312.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
4. Loren Thompson, "The Geopolitics of China's Rise," *Early Warning Blog—Lexington Institute*, January 28, 2011.
5. Robert D Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 3, 2010, p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Robert D Kaplan, "The South China Sea is the Fututre of Conflict," *Foreign Policy*, September/October, 2011.
8. *Ibid.*
9. For more details, see "Asia's Balance of Power: China's Military Rise," *The Economist*, April 7, 2012.
10. "What is behind US 'Return-to-Asia' Strategy?" *People's Liberation Army Daily*, December 2011.
11. K Hyde, "Operation Tomodachi: Support, Compassion, Commitment," *Japan Society*, November 15, 2011, available at <http://www.japansociety.org/page/multimedia/articles/operation-tomodachi-support-compassion-commitment>
12. *Ibid.* Simultaneously, the vulnerability of the Chinese lifeline can further be traced with Walsh's views cited in R Halloran, "The Rising East: Walsh Looks to Mackinder for Naval Strategy," *Honolulu Civil Beat*, January 20, 2012.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Adm Walsh left behind this proposal as he stepped down from his position as the Commander of the Pacific Fleet; *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*

16. For more details, see Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.
17. Ibid.
18. Monika Chansoria, "US Begins 'Strategic Pivot,'" *The Sunday Guardian*, April 15, 2012.
19. For more details, see US Pentagon's official policy paper, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, US Department of Defence, Washington D.C., January 2012.
20. "US DoD Releases Fiscal 2013 Budget Proposal," US Department of Defence, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defence (Public Affairs), No. 098-12, February 13, 2012.
21. Karen Parrish, "Panetta, Dempsey: Sequestration Would Defeat Defense Strategy," American Forces Press Service, Washington D.C., February 16, 2012.
22. Chansoria, n. 18.
23. Ibid.
24. Minxin Pei, "Who is the Real Superpower?" *The Indian Express*, December 13, 2011.
25. For a detailed debate on this subject, see David Shambaugh, "Return to the Middle Kingdom? China and Asia in the Early Twenty-First Century," in David Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 23.
26. Srikanth Kondapalli and Emi Mifune (eds.), *China and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2010), p. xvi.