

POLICY BRIEF

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Halford J. Mackinder’s 1904 Geographical Pivot: Context and Evidence to 21st Century’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategic Heartland’ Application

Dr. Monika Chansoria

Understanding classical geopolitics remains crucial to the study of international relations based on considerations of location and physical geography and to their adaptation of political goals. The said process has been a dynamic and evolving one, with the effects of location, geomorphology, and conditions for national power being regarded as essential constituents. It is often argued that geopolitics has always ‘self-consciously’ been a theory of foreign policy,¹ wherein physio-geographical conditions were a vital parameter of the studies that explained the expansion of European powers in the past. From thereon, a dominating geostrategic prediction for the 21st century was that it would be an Asian one. That notwithstanding, Asian states find themselves at a strategic crossroads in the midst of multiple, overlapping challenges, which include: putting their domestic fiscal houses in order; ensuring long-term economic growth; and a critical need to shape a leaner and technologically advanced joint force in the military sphere. Even as the United States and its alliance partners in Asia hopefully work toward cooperative exits from the increasingly unsustainable current global co-dependency—where the economic growth is being viewed through continued consumption and utilization of resources loaned by others—Washington’s approach and focus on renewing its economic and military power is being watched carefully. The US position has been confronted with serious challenges, all of which, if left unaddressed, could undermine the current security environment.²

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1 Christopher J. Fettweis, “Revisiting Mackinder and Angell: The Obsolescence of Great Power Geopolitics,” *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 22, no. 2, April-June 2003, pp. 119-20.

2 Ashley J. Tellis, “Power Shift: How the West Can Adapt and Thrive in an Asian Century,” *Asia Paper Series*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 2010, p. 8.

Yet, this era will be fundamentally different from the first iteration of the Asian miracle, in that, allies and competitors are now inextricably entwined in a dense web of transactions which increase absolute gains unevenly. The US and its partners are facing many more challenges in maintaining a stable and balanced geopolitical Asian order. The most effective strategy for Washington is not to retrench from its commitment to expanding the open economic system, but to maintain in good repair the various elements of its own national power in order to mitigate any tensions that may arise, either regionally or globally, between economic gains and international security.³ The precarious debate surrounding Washington's relative decline in world politics gains momentum concurrently with the 'rise and arrival' of China. These realities have forced a reassessment of Asia's geo-strategic chessboard. Contemporary dynamic changes, when placed in historical reference and context of the remarkable renaissance of early 20th century geopolitics, make for the thematic core of understanding present day Asian geopolitics and geostrategy, as this paper seeks to discover.

Present-day 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 the making of statecraft. Various historical conceptions of geopolitics have enthusiastically been taken up and applied in studying the imperial decline, the likes of which gripped Britain almost a century before. This

can be glimpsed in the contemporary rhetoric of American policymakers and commentators while they evoked ideas of "geographical pivots", "heartlands" and "sea-power". The contending geopolitical visions have a profound influence on policy formulation. The most fundamental among these is China's growing naval presence and power projection in the East China Sea and South China Sea⁴ – thus underscoring the reality that the Western Pacific and Indo-Pacific at large, collectively constitutes the 21st century's *geographical pivot*.

Putting this development into historical context, the former President of the US Naval War College, Alfred Thayer Mahan, pointed that the failure of France to outcompete Britain in terms of naval power resulted from the French coast not being conducive to building harbors.⁵ Located on the European continent, France had to invest, both, in its army and navy, whilst in comparison, Britain could concentrate solely on its naval power. Besides, the French naval forces were divided into the Atlantic Coast and English Channel on the one side, and the Mediterranean Sea on the other. The Royal Navy, conversely, concentrated its power upon a single theatre of operation.⁶ Ellen Semple advanced similar ideas in Leipzig in the late 19th century by arguing that coastal geomorphology of the northern Atlantic Ocean was favorable to seafaring (alluding to the Ocean's numerous inlets and smaller islands).⁷ Nearly half a century after Mahan published his thoughts, Nicholas J. Spykman wrote "... it is the geographical location of a country and its relations to centers of military power that define

3 Ibid.

4 For more details see, Monika Chansoria and Paul Benjamin Richardson, "Placing China in America's Strategic 'Pivot' to the Asia-Pacific: The Centrality of Halford Mackinder's Theory," *Journal of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, Summer 2012 edition, pp. 78-87.

5 Sören Scholvin, "Geopolitics: An Overview of Concepts and Empirical Examples from International Relations," *Working Paper*, no. 91, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, April 2016, p. 9.

6 Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (London: Low, 1890).

7 For details see, *American History and its Geographic Conditions* (Boston: Mifflin, 1903); also see, James Fairgrieve, *Geography and World Power* (London: University of London Press, 1917); and see, *Influences of Geographic Environment: On the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropo-Geography* (New York: Holt, 1911) p. 1.

its problem[s] of security.”⁸ The topography in case of landlocked states, island states, and states possessing both land and sea borders, plays a central role in pursuing strategies while formulating national defense policies.⁹ For that matter, attribution of national expansion to topography, as history shows, when ancient Greek city-states became maritime powers once they had settled their respective valleys since mountain ranges hampered further expansion on land.¹⁰

Mackinder and the Geographical Pivot of History : An Introduction

Perhaps among the most eminent historical figures associated with the study of geopolitics was British political geographer Halford J. Mackinder (1861–1947). Regarded as one of the founders of geopolitics and geostrategy, Mackinder’s renowned and seminal work, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, published in 1904 is considered a presentiment of many of the global geopolitical shifts of the 20th century. In this study, Mackinder emphasized the potential influence of the vast continental area of Eurasia on world history. In order to capture the essence of this rising zone of geopolitical power, Mackinder coined the term ‘heartland’ to describe, what he believed, would become a new ‘geographical pivot’. In Mackinder’s conception, the world, as of 1904, was primarily divided into three distinct spaces:¹¹

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

The Heartland Theory was essentially geographical in its outlook, citing a critical geostrategic linkage between land control and geopolitical power. The actual balance of this power would be a product of geographical conditions (economic and strategic) and the relative number, virility, equipment, and organization of the competing peoples.¹²

Mackinder, by means of his famed essay, aimed to make a geographical formula which could fit into any political balance. He attributed the respective strengths and weaknesses of continental and maritime powers to locational and physio-geographical conditions and did not seek to explain everyday politics this way.”¹³ Mackinder’s thought could be summarized in the following statement: “Geographical constants [...] bless any power in control of this ‘heartland’ [i.e., the interior of the Eurasian landmass] with the most advantageous position from which to project power over [...] the entire world.”¹⁴ The epistemology of physical geography outlined by Mackinder affirmed “... geographical features

8 Nicholas J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, 1942) p. 447.

9 For details see, Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy II,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1938, pp. 213–36. Robert Jervis adapted this idea in his seminal article, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1978, pp. 167–214, suggesting that if all states were self-sufficient islands, anarchy would be much less of a problem.

10 Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy I,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1938, pp. 28–50, cited in Scholvin, n. 5, p. 11.

11 Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History (1904),” *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, [April] 1904, pp. 421-444.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. p. 443.

14 Christopher J. Fettweis, “On Heartlands and Chessboards: Classical Geopolitics, Then and Now,” *Orbis*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2015, p. 234.

govern, or, at least, guide history... that man, and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure, controls.”¹⁵ A substantial part of Mackinder’s writings reflected the geopolitical realities of that era. The British imperial elite, to which Mackinder belonged, were preoccupied, if not obsessed, with rising rival powers, and maintaining British dominance in the oceans. It was, therefore, not surprising that Mackinder’s ideas found a receptive audience amongst an elite who were increasingly concerned how not to concede, to any state, the competitive economic and military advantages that sea-power brought along with it.

While presenting his work *The Geographical Pivot of History* at the Royal Geographical Society in January 1904, Mackinder challenged the long-harbored belief that sea power held ultimate superiority in favor of steam technologies.¹⁶ He presented a conception of how the Russian empire could exploit the geographical advantages of central Eurasia by extending a massive rail network to gather the natural resources of the Eurasian mainland, noting the central portion of the Eurasian landmass that was inaccessible to naval ships as ‘the pivot region’ of world politics. Railway lines were expected to make the heartland’s presumably vast resources accessible, resulting in the rise of continental powers.¹⁷ Mackinder described and defined the fundamental shift of the beginning of the Columbian Epoch in the late 15th century, and its end, which happened in his own lifetime due to technological innovation.

Innovation in navigation rendered maritime

transport far superior to land transport, leading to the steep and phenomenal rise of maritime powers.¹⁸ The effect of location and physio-geographical conditions on international relations depended on technology, and the ability of humankind to overcome geographical barriers and make use of geographical opportunities.¹⁹ Elucidating his thoughts, Mackinder believed that over the preceding few centuries, the opening of the oceans had reversed the fortunes of world history in Europe’s favor, at the expense of Asia.²⁰ However, at the beginning of the 20th century, he saw that railways could open continental Eurasia, similar to the way in which merchant and military ships had paved way for Britain’s vast overseas empire. Mackinder’s conviction in 1904 drove him to conclude that the states controlling the ‘heartland’ would consolidate space, resources, and power until the littoral spaces of Europe and Asia would additionally get subsumed into the heartland. 39 years later, in 1943, Mackinder wrote another article in *Foreign Affairs* where he used the term ‘heartland’ to refer to the ‘pivot region’ of Eurasia (including Siberia and wide swaths of modern-day Russian territory).²¹

However, Mackinder’s expectation of the heartland being marked by an abundance of natural resources proved incorrect in time, as did his prediction that rail transport will surpass maritime transport since maritime transport remained far superior compared to transportation by rail. In the said reference, proponents of classical geopolitics were able to modify Mackinder’s theory so as to explain that the Rimland, i.e., wider littoral area of Eurasia

15 Halford J. Mackinder, “The Physical Basis of Political Geography,” *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1890, p. 78.

16 Mackinder, n. 11.

17 Ibid.

18 Scholvin, n. 5, p. 14.

19 Ibid.

20 Mackinder, n. 11.

21 William Mayborn, “The Pivot to Asia: The Persistent Logics of Geopolitics and the Rise of China,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2014, p. 84.

was central to global hegemony for locational reasons.²²

Geography and Realist Geopolitics

Exploring Mackinder's thought demonstrates the rich variety of realist thinking. Mackinder's realist credentials were established through his writings that clearly fit into the definition of realism as a mode of thought. Mackinder's work had direct influence on the development of post-1940s realist strategic studies.²³ Mackinder had a lasting influence on the direction of realist thought in geopolitics, the development of political geography and geopolitics. at the beginning of the 20th century. Laying out a realist conception of power and space, and then examining its basis for his normative theory²⁴ Mackinder's geopolitics left the sea powers in a risky position. The book *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* advocated a novel way to transcend the realities of geopolitics, and Mackinder saw this as the only hope for sea powers of the Rimland.²⁵ He stated in his famous maxim: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world'. Writing with the policies of the peripheral sea powers in mind, Mackinder and Mahan disagreed on the extent to which sea power could dominate the globe but were united by their concern for understanding how the Anglophone world could maintain its freedom and dominance.²⁶ In fact, earlier, Mackinder

quoted Mahan's work as the basis for understanding the role of the navy, and agreed with latter's view that the advantage of sea power lay in its ability to choose the location of the adversary's coast that had to be attacked.²⁷

Nicholas Spykman who joined the geopolitics debate in 1942 largely agreed with Mackinder's views. Spykman wrote, "Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent."²⁸ However, in 1944, Spykman challenged Mackinder's famous pronouncement "... who controls Eastern Europe rules the heartland; who rules the heartland rules the whole Island; and who rules the world Island rules the World." Spykman put forth a new dictum, "... who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the world."²⁹ The Rimland did not merely constitute the coast of Eurasia, but a wide expanse of land that wraps around the western, southern, and eastern boundaries of the Eurasian center.³⁰ Most of Europe was considered the 'Rimland' since it possessed numerous access points to the sea. The apprehension that a single Eurasian power would gain the resources and wealth of the 'Eurasian heartland' and thereafter inevitably become capable of extending that power to the Rimland regions and would ultimately control the entire world's resources loomed large.³¹

Maritime powers, particularly the US had to contain the heartlandic challengers by controlling this Rimland. For that matter, the

22 Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (Hamden: Harcourt, 1944).

23 Lucian M. Ashworth, "Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and the Reality of the League of Nations," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2010, pp. 279-301.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 289.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

27 Halford J. Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) pp. 310-314.

28 Spykman, n. 8, p. 41.

29 Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, n. 22, p. 43.

30 Mayborn, n. 21, p. 84.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

Rimland theory shaped world politics for nearly half a century and arguably shapes the foreign policy of the US to a large extent even today, given its efforts and resources allocated to counter revisionist powers from dominating the East Asian and Southeast Asian Rimlands.

The geopolitical logic of Mackinder that geography remains an important factor in international relations was challenged many decades later with technological progress in weapon systems, communication, transportation, and even the speed of capital transfers that altered the properties of distance.³² Technological breakthroughs allowed long-held strategic enhancers including islands and forward operating bases. While geopolitics had its share of limitations, technological advancement held the potential to change geographic drivers.³³ As the power and territory of the heartland was consolidating and expanding over a period of time, land power too, got translated into sea power. By the end of the Second World War, Britain had seemingly relinquished its dominance of the oceans to the United States, and for the latter half of the last century, the US gained similar benefits to those enjoyed by imperial Britain. Notably, this thinking on pre-eminence at sea amongst a section of US' political, intellectual and military elite was much in line with that in Britain. Similar imperial anxieties could be seen to those that prevailed during Mackinder's times. An instance was the *1990 US National Security Strategy* document that noted "... for most of the century, the United States deemed it a vital interest to prevent any power or group of powers from dominating the Eurasian

landmass."³⁴ This statement was closely aligned to the geopolitical paradigm of Mackinder's *Heartland Theory* which stated that the power that controls Central Asia—the great pivot—would eventually emerge as the most powerful state in international politics.³⁵

Mackinder's *Heartland Theory* dates back over a century. The theory engaged geography in international politics both literally and figuratively. Literally, the theory centered on the concept of a 'pivot area/heartland' that was a sizeable region in Eurasia over which regional political control by a given country would, in turn, determine that country's supremacy over world politics. Figuratively, the theory presented a deterministic view of international politics as solely a function of geographical resources.³⁶ Mackinder emphasized Eastern Europe to being the locus wherein geostrategic access to the heartland would be better facilitated and augmented with the pivot area extending throughout most of Eurasia. Indicative evidence tends to suggest that the Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics in the context of competitiveness over resources and geo-strategy remains conducive.³⁷ Great Powers remained cognizant of the geopolitical framework and significance of their policies and strategies that seemingly remain entrenched in Mackinderian philosophy.³⁸ Based on all of the above, a fundamental question thus arising in the contemporary context is to what extent Mackinder's *Heartland Theory* influences the contemporary foreign policy choices and priorities of the US and China.

32 Ibid., p. 91.

33 Spykman, n. 22, p. 58.

34 Fettweis, n. 1.

35 Margaret Scott and Westenley Alcenat, "Revisiting the Pivot: The Influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics," Paper for Macalester College, Minnesota, May 2008, p. 1.

36 Ibid., p. 3.

37 Ibid., p. 25.

38 Ibid.

China and the ‘Relocated’ Heartland

For a quarter of a century now, Asia’s tectonic plates of power have shifted to a degree that have made way for China to return to its traditional role as continent’s central actor. To achieve this end, Beijing diligently appears to be working towards attaining higher levels of comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*) and the accrual of the traditional attributes of power.³⁹ The *heartland theory*, whether acknowledged directly, or in principle, holds considerable contemporary leverage, at least contextually, for nations such as China whilst it reaches out to regional countries across Asia and outside, in order to maximize economic power and political influence. The *geographical pivot* hypothesis resonates in the discourse on China’s foreign policy. . Predicting the rise of the Chinese state in 1944, Walter Lippmann wrote, “... China will be a great power capable of organizing its own regional security among the smaller states of Indochina, Burma, Thailand, and Malaya.”⁴⁰ Of late, there has been a renewed interest in the heartland concept, though this time, instead of Eurasia, the heartland appears to have relocated and been reconceptualized. Today, China and its role in shaping Asia have reframed the geographical pivot of geopolitical history. Loren Thompson at the Lexington Institute outlines:

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.⁴¹ [Emphasis added]

Seizing upon Mackinder’s ideas, Robert D Kaplan highlighted that China’s geographical position, given its 9,000-mile temperate coastline with many natural harbors, makes it destined to be both a land and sea power.⁴² Kaplan opened his 2010 *Foreign Affairs* article titled *Geography of Chinese Power* with the closing lines of Mackinder’s paper:

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.⁴³

The caution issued above by Robert D Kaplan on China’s rise, seemingly attributed to its favorable geography. Kaplan, an avowed geographical determinist suggested that the physical contours of East Asia augur for a naval century based upon the manner in which geography illuminates and sets priorities.⁴⁴ However, at the dawn of the naval century, Kaplan concurrently noted that standing in the way of any potential Chinese geostrategic dominance beyond the East, or South China Sea, is the Western Pacific and the regional players it is host to. Kaplan summarized: “China’s answer to feeling so boxed in has been aggressive at times...Still an insecure sea

39 For a detailed debate on the 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.

40 For relayed details see, Walter Lippmann, *US War Aims* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944) p. 93.

41 Loren Thompson, “The Geopolitics of China’s Rise,” *Early Warning Blog*, Lexington Institute, January 28, 2011.

42 Robert D. Kaplan, “The Geography of Chinese Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 3, 2010, p. 22.

43 Ibid.

44 Robert D. Kaplan, “The South China Sea is the Future of Conflict,” *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2011.

power, it thinks about the ocean territorially.”⁴⁵ The decades following the end of the Cold War witnessed Beijing’s growing clout to become a great Eurasian power, echoing one of Mackinder’s 1904 statements, “... the Chinese ... might constitute ... peril to the world’s freedom ... because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent, an advantage as yet denied ... of the pivot region.”⁴⁶

Referring to Mackinder in 2011, Lin Zhiyuan at the PLA’s Academy of Military Sciences in Beijing had stated that the South China Sea was likely to become even tenser owing to the emphasis of the US Navy on Mackinder’s *heartland theory*.⁴⁷ China’s ongoing involvement in multiple incidents and heated exchanges over territorial claims in the South and East China Sea bring back the focus of the debate to sovereignty claims and to the implications of demonstrating wider military presence and diplomatic subtlety. The possibility of China pursuing its own interests and challenging the rules-based free and liberal world order, would be a disturbing aspect of Beijing’s placement in Asia.⁴⁸

Apart from the influence of its historical Silk Road, the strategic logic behind China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) in terms of its geographical span can be elucidated through the theories of both Mackinder and Mahan. In contemporary summation, the *Belt and Road Initiative* seeks to introduce/create a new *heartland* consisting of the large landmass of

China and Central Asia with parts of Eastern and Western Europe—a geographical stretch similar to Mackinder’s original landmass, albeit excluding Russia.⁴⁹ However, unlike Russia in Mackinder’s original *heartland* geographical space, China has vast areas with ocean frontage and access to numerous warm-water ports that are important for all-year access for ships.⁵⁰ The new fulcrum of power, potentially created via the BRI, will have strong influence over a large Eurasian continental area, enable securing of energy supplies via Central Asia, and develop new land trade routes through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor that will serve as an important alternative to Beijing’s sole reliance on maritime routes for its trade and strategic supplies.⁵¹ By developing its restive western frontier, China shall likely cut down reliance on its eastern seaboard zones for economic development and create additional strategic economic zones in its western spaces to sustain economic growth.⁵²

The maritime portion of the BRI appears strongly influenced by Alfred Mahan, whose ideas were encapsulated in his classic 1890 book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. Mahan believed that the US should build a formidable navy and expand its maritime capabilities to be a major sea power that could mirror Britain’s power and possessions in the world. Apart from naval strategies in war, Mahan also suggested that an aspiring sea power should gain land possessions to support its maritime fleet’s logistical needs. These land possessions would also serve as forward

45 Ibid.

46 Mackinder, n. 11.

47 Lin Zhiyuan’s interview “What is behind US ‘Return-to-Asia’ strategy?” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, December 2011.

48 For related details and reading see, “Asia’s Balance of Power: China’s Military Rise,” *The Economist*, April 7, 2012.

49 For more details see, Adam Leong Kok Wey, “A Mackinder–Mahan Geopolitical View of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *News Brief*, Royal United Services Institute, London, vol. 39, no. 6, July 2019.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

strategic bases.⁵³ Accordingly, the BRI sea route involves large-scale co-development of ports and maritime support centers across the Indo-Pacific, which Mahan identified as one of the key variables in ensuring the capability to project and sustain a state's maritime power and extend its geopolitical presence in the world.⁵⁴ The combination of Mackinder and Mahan's geopolitical and strategic thoughts provide a plausible interpretation that China's BRI is a grand strategy of epic proportions designed to safeguard China's future economic, security, and strategic interests in its maritime and land dimensions as well as expanding its power and influence over large continental land, and maritime areas.⁵⁵

***Indo-Pacific:
The Current and Future Geopolitical and
Geostrategic Pivot of Asia***

The *heartland theory*, applied in the contemporary Asian context, underscores a strategic shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In reference to the rise of contemporary China, Mackinder's ideas were ardently taken up by the likes of Admiral Patrick Walsh, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet until his retirement at the beginning of 2012. Walsh explicitly referenced Mackinder while explaining 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'.⁵⁶ Walsh regarded the

South China Sea as today's strategic pivot and underscored its criticality in noting that 70,000 container ships, accounting for approximately \$5 trillion of economic activity passed through the Straits of Malacca annually.⁵⁷ He further stressed: "In the Pacific Century, sea power resumes its traditional role in the sea-lines of communication..."⁵⁸ Based on these geostrategic realities and significance, Walsh proposed that the US presence in Asia would be best served if Washington shifted its strategic focus and forces specifically to the South China Sea.⁵⁹ Using Mackinder's framework, Walsh insisted that whoever controls the South China Sea would end up exerting critical influence over the world. The South China Sea can either be kept open for economic activity and benefits of the US and its allies or be closed in an operation to dissuade any/all imminent threats.⁶⁰

Flowing from this, the Obama administration's defense and strategic-guidance document, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, announced at the beginning of 2012, sought to prioritize goals for the 21st century while attempting to retain US' global leadership as it reoriented towards the Asia-Pacific [now the Indo-Pacific].⁶¹ Obama stated that the "US is, and will be, a Pacific power... Reductions in US defense spending will not, I repeat, will not, come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific."⁶² Overall, the strategic vision announced by the Obama administration represented adroit politico-military maneuvering

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 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>

57 Ibid. 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.

58 Ibid.

59 Admiral Walsh left behind this proposal as he stepped down from his position as Commander of Pacific Fleet.

60 Ibid.

61 Monika Chansoria, "US Begins Strategic Pivot," *The Sunday Guardian*, April 15, 2012.

62 For more details see, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, US Department of Defense, Washington D.C., January 2012.

that sought to overcome a growing perception in the region that Washington could no longer be considered a credible leverage against Beijing. Perceptible military muscle-flexing by China and the ensuing tensions appears to have been the primary determinant for Washington to reassess its strategic initiative in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific.⁶³ Increased and focused US marine presence in the region aims at protecting assets that remained susceptible to the anti-access measures being employed by the People’s Republic of China. Washington’s strategic vision document pronounced that its ‘rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region’ could be read in reference to states as “China and Iran, continuing to pursue asymmetric means to counter US’ power projection capabilities.”⁶⁴

Pentagon’s document, *Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, delved into the global security environment that presented an increasingly complex set of challenges and opportunities, to which all elements of US national power must be applied. US’ economic and security interests remain inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the US’ rebalance towards Asia-Pacific was a means to reassure its Asian allies and key partners who are critical to the future stability and growth of the region. It is vital for the US and its existing alliance and key strategic partners to provide a vital foundation for Indo-Pacific security by means of expanding networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Indo-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.⁶⁶

Moreover, the US, Japan and Australia are expected to further increase their investment in their ability to serve as regional economic anchors and contributors to cooperative security in the broader Indian Ocean Region. The maintenance of peace, stability, free flow of commerce, and of US influence in this dynamic region will depend in part on an underlying balance of military capability and presence. Necessary investments by the US to ensure maintenance of regional access and ability to operate freely in keeping with international law shall be pitched directly against China’s emergence as a strong contender in East Asian security and stability.

To enable security, economic growth and commerce, Indo-Pacific stakeholders should continue promoting a rules-based international order that ensures underlying stability and encourages the peaceful rise of powers, economic dynamism, and constructive cooperation. America, working in conjunction with allies and partners around the world, should seek to protect freedom of access throughout the global commons constituting the vital connective tissue of the international system.⁶⁷ Global security and prosperity are increasingly dependent on the free flow of goods shipped by air or sea. State and non-state actors pose potential threats to access in the global commons, whether through opposition to existing norms or other anti-access approaches. Indo-Pacific stakeholders should pursue joint efforts to assure access to and use of the global commons, both by strengthening international norms of responsible behavior and by maintaining relevant and interoperable military capabilities.⁶⁸

63 Minxin Pei, “Who is the Real Superpower?” *The Indian Express*, December 13, 2011.

64 *Sustaining US Global Leadership*, n. 62.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

Pentagon's *Priorities for 21st Century Defense* outlined in 2012 had spelt out the need for moving *Toward a Joint Force of 2020*. Recognition of re-alignments demands substantial military rebalancing, given that it cannot be predicted how the strategic environment will evolve with absolute certainty.⁶⁹ Interestingly, the Pentagon's 2012 strategic vision cemented Mackinder's thinking being firmly embraced by Washington, when former US Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, announced in November 2011 that the United States intended to turn to the Pacific. There were hints of a convergence of Walsh and Mackinder's thinking in the announcement made by Washington.⁷⁰ The Western Pacific has emerged as the contemporary geographical pivot, just as Eurasia had emerged for Mackinder more than a century earlier. The language of Mackinder was loudly resonating in Clinton's following statement:

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."⁷¹ [Emphasis added].

Currently, the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) is one of six geographic combatant commands in charge of the Indo-Pacific including the US Forces Korea, US Forces Japan, US Special Operations Command Pacific, US Pacific Fleet, US

Marine Forces Pacific, US Pacific Air Forces and US Army Pacific. There are few regions as culturally, socially, economically, and geopolitically diverse as the Indo-Pacific. The region is home to more than 50 percent of the world's population, five nations allied with the US through mutual defense treaties and with seven of the world's ten largest standing militaries.⁷² Given these conditions, the strategic complexity facing the Indo-Pacific is unique.

In the post-Obama phase, the Trump administration rolled out a new "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept in late 2017—a strategy which displayed noteworthy continuity between the Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific and the Asia policies of previous US administrations. Trump underscored that the concept of "...free and open Indo-Pacific ... where sovereign and independent nations can all prosper side-by-side and thrive in freedom and in peace."⁷³ Beyond this aspirational goal, the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific concept has endorsed the conventional building blocks of US engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, namely, building collective security through a network of regional allies and partners, promoting economic prosperity, and encouraging good governance and shared principles.⁷⁴ The administration rolled out a number of initiatives, including increased engagement in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands region which support these goals.⁷⁵ Through efforts to enhance ties with strong democratic partners like Japan and India, the administration's strategy reaffirms

69 Ibid., pp. 6-8.

70 For more details see, Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

71 Ibid.

72 For details on United States Indo-Pacific Command see, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>

73 Remarks by President Donald Trump at the APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam, November 10, 2017, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceosummit-da-nang-vietnam/>

74 For details see, Lindsey W. Ford, "The Trump Administration and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'," *Brookings Foreign Policy*, The Brookings Institution, May 2020, available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/fp_20200505_free_open_indo_pacific.pdf, p. 1.

75 Ibid.

consistent, bipartisan priorities that have guided American engagement in Asia for decades.⁷⁶ Despite early concerns that the Trump administration might walk away from the US ‘pivot’ to Asia, the elements of consistency in its Indo-Pacific strategy seem to confirm Asia’s importance and centrality in American foreign policy.⁷⁷

Asian allies has never been higher in order to promote and ensure continuity of its legitimacy as Asia’s offshore balancer.

In the midst of the rapid geopolitical and geostrategic shifts, Washington is subject to an intensifying peril to its economic and military supremacy, placed against China’s growing clout and presence which will remain a major determinant that would finalize the strategic graph of Asia’s security. In the near- and mid-term future, Asian states shall witness regulation of their relations towards Beijing, as well as with each other. There is an increasing requirement for US ‘pivot’ to the Indo-Pacific to become the hallmark of guarantee of security in so far as its Asian allies and key strategic partners are concerned. While Washington is turning a page in its history following successive wars that bore no tangible results, the question over whether the US’ ‘strategic pivot’ shall succeed in maintaining American pre-eminence in the Western Pacific, or whether it would further complicate America’s equation with China, and result in increased confrontation, is still an evolving question. What is becoming certain though is the US’ revised strategic agenda focusing on the Indo-Pacific, conceptualized by a rehabilitation of Mackinder’s *geographical pivot of history*, thereby establishing the enduring legacy of the early 20th century geopolitics in the context of contemporary regional strategic realities. While the ideas of Mackinder may be considered powerful rhetorical tools to frame the rise of China normatively, they also serve in underscoring modern-day complexities of the East China Sea and South China Sea. Nevertheless, the buoyancy and vitality of the US as the critical guarantor of security for its

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 1.