

The Pivot of Geography and The Ukrainian Conflict

Mackinder held that geography, not economics, is the fundamental determinant of world power; and Russia, simply by virtue of its physical location, inherits a primary global role. Or as Robert Kaplan stated in 'Revenge of Geography,' "times of global upheaval, testing as they do our assumptions about the permanence of the political map, lead to a renaissance in thinking about geography". Is there, therefore, a need to examine the clash between Russia and the West from this larger lens?

Because Ukraine connects Europe and Asia and controls the North of the Black Sea, the Russo-Ukraine conflict today has caused a structural change to the balance between great powers. From the West's perspective Ukraine forms an integral part of pivot of the region. Surely, they would not give up the opportunity provided by Ukraine's willingness to draw closer to them and join NATO. This would accord security, economic and political advantage in this vital region, pulling out would send a negative signal of weakness to its other allies in Eastern Europe as being uncertain and unreliable partner when faced with a threat from Russia. A repeat of the message sent out by their sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan which is now resulting in changing contours in West Asia, would be disastrous.

Further, does Russia's push against Europe's borderlands evoke the long-standing competition between essentially maritime countries and their land-based, Eurasian challengers?

Thinking about the rivalry that took much of its present form in two turn-of-the-century writings: Alfred Thayer Mahan's 'The Influence of Sea Power Upon History', written in 1890 and Halford John Mackinder's defining article 'The Geographical Pivot of History' published in 1904. More recently, Nicholas Spykman in 1942, propounded what came to be known as the Rimland thesis, which suggested that it was the coasts and peripheries of Eurasia—principally Europe and East Asia—which constituted the basis of geopolitical power.^[i]

The basic outlines of both Mahan's and Mackinder's concepts of world power are well known. Mahan posited that the determining factor in world power is sea power. The trade-oriented, maritime country, Mahan said, reliably prevails over the land-focused country. He thought that sea power was more important than land power in the fight for dominance. Mackinder's theory of geopolitics, dominance of Eurasia (the "Heartland") enables dominance of the outlying continents (the "World-Island"), and such a combination is tantamount to a World Empire whereas Spykman talked of control of the 'Rimland' which is essential to control the world.^[ii]

Despite centuries of technological progress and human enlightenment, Mackinder believed that geography remained the fundamental constituent of world order, just as it had been during the Peloponnesian War, in which the sea power Athens faced off against Greece's greatest land Army Sparta. Since then, geopoliticians have argued, most armed conflicts have always featured a stronger Navy against a stronger Army. Sea power and land power, in other words, are destined to clash. The global seat of land power — inner Eurasia, the territory of the Russian Empire — would forever be in global competition with the sea power, the mantle of which was transferred from Great Britain to the United States.^[iii]

The important geostrategic insight of the American political leadership at the end of World War II was that the Atlantic could no longer be the dividing line between East and West. America's security became inextricably linked with the fate of the Heartland. ^[iv] The, then, American

Chargé d’Affaires in Moscow, George Kennan, sent a ‘long’, now legendary telegram to Washington, where he urged it to implement the ideas of Spykman by containing the power controlling Eurasia. The result was America’s containment strategy. [\[v\]](#)

With the bringing down of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of USSR the world, it was believed, had become unipolar and Francis Fukuyama had claimed the end of the history with democracy and capitalism as the victors. It was argued that liberalism had won the historic battle of ideas. “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. However, the collapse of Russian communism 1991, did not mark the ideological victory of capitalism, nor “the End of History”.[\[vi\]](#)

It rather designated a new stage in ‘the Clash of Civilisations’ as advocated by Samuel Huntington. He argued that the widespread Western belief in the universality of the West's values and political systems is naïve and that continued insistence on democratisation and such ‘universal’ norms will only further antagonise other civilizations.[\[vii\]](#) Huntington saw the West was reluctant to accept this because it built the international system and wrote its laws. Are we now witnessing a clash between two systems; democracy versus autocracy and a challenge to the liberal world order?

Or can the present crisis be traced to Thucydides; “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”. The options before Ukraine and Russia were either black or white; a grey area could have been Ukraine joining EU but not NATO. This neutral approach could have preserved the Ukrainian territorial integrity, offered the prospect of a better living standard for the Ukrainian people and satisfied Russian security concerns. Ukraine could have struck a balance and gained the best of both worlds.

Are we witnessing a pattern of structural stress that results when a rising power challenges a ruling one. This phenomenon is as old as history itself. The Peloponnesian War that devastated ancient Greece, as explained by the historian Thucydides was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta, that made war inevitable. To paraphrase Graham Allison, a resurgent Russia is ‘Destined for War’. He, of course, had written the book with reference to the rise of China.

Ukraine currently stands at the heart of a new global crisis, pitting Russia against the West. The United States and the European view converge that “a strong, independent Ukraine is an important part of building a Europe whole, free, and at peace”. The rapid expansion of the NATO alliance and the EU, particularly since the 1990s, aims to secure Europe and curtail Russia’s influence over European territory and environs. Recent efforts to incorporate Ukraine under the umbrella of a Western economic and security partnership has tilted the balance, with the extension of Western influence into Russia’s own backyard, in order to bring the eastern gateway firmly under Western control. Russia, if weak in the past, seems now resurgent and though the current conflict aims to regain its own areas of influence. Russia is unlikely to allow the West to expand any further East to achieve its objectives and is viewing this as an existential crisis.

In the struggle between the West and Russia over influence in the ‘buffer zones’, geography has shaped and continues to shape their respective strategies regardless of the historical period or the circumstances. These so-called ‘buffer zones’ generally refer to Eastern and Central

European states, even if for the most part these states have now joined NATO and/or the EU, leaving just two contested states – Ukraine and Belarus – to constitute the last barrier separating the West and its allies from Russia. Together they extend along the greater part of this ‘gateway’, the open land corridor stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea.^[viii]

Russia still values the importance of the entire area occupied by the former Soviet Union as ‘regions of privileged interests for Russia’; Not surprising then that Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union as ‘a major geopolitical disaster’.

President, Boris Yeltsin, who sought integration with the West, concluded that while the ideological struggle prevalent during the Cold War was ruled out, the struggle to achieve strategic goals was still alive. Russia closely watched the West expanding its influence towards Eastern Europe by means of NATO and EU membership. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov considered Western strategic behaviour as “spreading ... geopolitical influence to the East, which has become, in essence, ‘a new edition’ of the policy to contain Russia’.^[ix]

President Putin’s desire to irreversibly absorb Eastern Ukraine into his desired territory can be reduced to two main factors relating to these theories: access to warm water ports, aligning with Spykman’s ‘Rimland’, and the expansion and protection of Eastern land power, reflecting Mackinder’s ‘Heartland’. In a globalised world, the ability to trade with ease brings economic leverage, and leverage brings power.^[x]

For a country with such vast coastal territory, Russia has appallingly bad access to global sea routes and trading, with many ports frozen year-round. The Crimean Port of Sevastopol is, hence, vital in providing warm water access to global shipping routes and allowing the Russian military control into the Black Sea and further beyond. Secondly, any Westwards territorial expansion is deemed as advantageous to the Russian regime, who see the US and NATO as a threat.

All countries must make decisions as to where they direct their resources. Resources are finite, including for the United States. For centuries, the exponents of Sea Power have prevailed by devoting the resources necessary to preserve freedom of navigation and to deny any Heartland aggressor use of the seas as a route for expansion.^[xi]

The region between the Black and Baltic Seas represents the Eastern gateway leading to the West, but can be also viewed as the Western gateway leading to the East. Russia has not forgotten the invasions of Napoleon and Hitler via this gateway. Moscow has resorted to both soft and hard power in its efforts to consolidate a sphere of influence in the inner Eurasian heartland of the former USSR called the Eurasian Union.

In the present conflict, Russia quickly blockaded Ukraine by closing the Kerch Strait, which connects the smaller Sea of Azov to the Black Sea and established complete control of the Sea of Azov, and by stationing ships off Odessa and other Ukrainian ports blockaded Ukraine from the sea. This ensured that it eliminated the ability to resupply the Ukrainian military via the sea, which could have moved far more material, far more quickly towards the fighting in the East rather than from the Polish border across the entire length of the country.^[xii]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine appears, on the surface, to be a land war but we also need to appreciate the central role the seas and naval power play in securing strategic security interests. ^[xiii]To be a major power, Russia needs to control not only the heartland but also the rimland and thereafter control the seas. Hence to paraphrase Mackinder;

Those who control the Heartland, command the Rimland

Those who control the Rimland, command the World Islands

Those who control the World Islands, command the World

Throughout history, geography has been the stage on which nations and empires have collided. Geography is the most fundamental factor in international politics because it is the most permanent. For that reason, geography also shapes the perspectives of leaders and, thereby, influences their decision-making in matters of foreign policy. It is thus, imperative that we build on the insights, and theories of great geographers and geopolitical thinkers to look at the evolving global scene. Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book 'The Grand Chessboard' quoted Napoleon; "to know a nations geography is to know its foreign policy".

Endnotes

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