

Mackinder's Heartland Theory: Historic Rivalry and the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Dr. Mansur Umar Khan¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes the Heartland Theory historically and determines that it is still remarkably relevant with regard to rivalry between the two Great Powers: China and the US. In fact, China's gigantic BRI project has given the Heartland Theory a new stimulus and drive. The paper also assesses the US rivalry with regard to Russian-German challenges to it, along with the technological changes that transpired in the last 117 years, since the theory was first affirmed. The final outlook in terms of the theory is that the primary struggle and rivalry of the 21st century will be between the US and China over the BRI, since failure of the BRI would almost by default be viewed as a victory for the US in terms of retaining its solitary superpower status over China. The reason for this is that without the success of the BRI China would remain vulnerable to the choke point of the Straits of Malacca and the might of the US Navy in the South China Sea. Contrary to this scenario, a prosperous BRI would give Beijing the huge advantage to thwart US encirclement designs and thus unite Eurasia geo-economically against US interests. This

¹ Dr. Mansur Umar Khan is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Aerospace Sciences & Strategic Studies (DASSS), Air University, Islamabad.

scenario has been described as a nightmare by American elites, especially with the accelerated decline of the USA due to the pandemic. Therefore, it is virtually inevitable, regardless which party is in power, that future US strategy is directed towards terminating the BRI.

Keywords: Heartland Theory, Belt and Road Initiative, US, China, Russia, Great Powers Rivalry.

Russia and the Eurasian Pivot of the Heartland Theory

Mackinder divided the world into Sea power versus Land power as two main geographical powers. He termed the preponderant side the “ring of bases” which linked the sea powers Britain, US, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Africa into domination of the world’s oceans along with their commerce power. This ring of prevailing sea-powers was shielded against threats from the land powers of Eurasia, which Mackinder referred to as the gigantic continent.² Mackinder argued, however, that sea-powers were on the decline, due to economic and industrial progress, leading to simultaneous prominence of terrestrial powers.³

This led him to sound the warning that if the Russian Empire was able to expand past the terrain of Euro-Asia and gain access to the gigantic resources there to build a naval fleet, “the empire of the world

² W. F Engdahl, “Behind the Anglo-American War on Russia,” *Global Research, Williamengdahl.com*, September 11, 2018, Available at: <http://www.williamengdahl.com/englishNEO11Sep2018.php> (accessed on 2 January 2021).

³ Torbjorn L. Knutsen, “Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis,” *Journal of The International History Review*, Vol.36, no. 5(2014), 835.