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Petersen's Book

THE WORLD ISLAND



Eurasian Geopolitics and
the Fate of the West

ALEXANDROS PETERSEN

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Author of *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*





CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Ideas and Geopolitics

The erstwhile position of the Western powers as the unmatched exemplars of progressive political organization, prosperity, and power projection is rapidly threatening to become an historical memory. While for a time the rise of the major Eastern powers had proceeded in parallel with continued betterment in the West, the dominant trend of global power politics since the end of the 1990s seems to point to a developing East-West divergence along zero-sum lines. The 1990s now looks to have represented an ahistorical geopolitical bubble, characterized by the default unipolarity of Western preponderance following Russia's imperial implosion and occurring at a time before most onlookers had been struck by the full brilliance of the Asian ascendancy. As the glare of that sun has loomed into proper view it has become clear that the light at its center—China—seeks to challenge the institutionalized setting of Western power as it exists beyond the borders of the Euro-Atlantic community. Added to this is the Russian recovery, which, although replete at every level with questions about its sustainability, is nonetheless a fact in the Eurasian space in the early twenty-first century. The watchword is authoritarianism, and while the Russian and Chinese stars may not be aligned in the long term, Moscow and Beijing do find themselves sharing a common short- to medium-term goal of banishing Western political and economic influence from the larger part of the Eurasian space and undermining it in its peninsular stronghold of Western Europe.

Of the two, Moscow is the more pugnacious in this enterprise, but Beijing's effort carries with it the greater momentum. Russia's reexpansion into the post-Soviet space is characterized by geostrategic prudence,

China's move into the same area and elsewhere by a spiritual quest to displace what it considers is its natural weight in world affairs. The unfolding struggle will be typified less by open use of force, or even the threat of it, than by economic leverage and political subterfuge. In that way we should not be thinking in Cold War terms even though great power confrontation is what is being discussed. Yet there remains a strong current of ideological competition, which is in many ways a truer representation of East-West digress than the capitalist-Communist struggle that characterized the Cold War. It is today's increasingly conspicuous free nation-authoritarianism struggle that goes to the heart of the East-West schism. Moscow and Beijing want to preserve their political culture, and the areas it has spread into, free from the Western institutional arrangements that have proven so attractive almost everywhere else in the world. The diplomatic score to this modern geopolitical opera are the soothsayings of multipolarity and equality of political and economic ideology. It is a sound to which Western ears need to be attuned, for it portends a reversal of the advance Western institutions have made, a reduced ability for Western actors to compete fairly for resources, and the possible demise of Western power altogether.

A preoccupied introversion in Europe and something of an identity crisis in the United States means that vacuum conditions are being created in many regions around the world, but particularly in the fissiparous climate of Eurasia. A process of long-term Western decline, perhaps leading to eventual dominance by some form of Chinese informal hegemony, is a distinct possibility. As the manifestations of this reality become increasingly abundant the dynamics of the West's important power relations and their focus need to be reassessed. The Eurasian landmass ought to be the focal point of the West's strategic exertions. The best explanation underlining this imperative remains the Heartland-World Island concept of the early twentieth-century British geostrategist Sir Halford Mackinder. Mackinder argued that a power able to dominate the vast landmass, resources, and peoples of Eurasia would in turn be able to dominate the globe. Therein lay the great problem for the West, which he identified and which will stand as a warning through the ages. Today Russia remains the power exercising the greatest influence throughout Eurasia, but much of that is historical and is becoming increasingly redundant in its existing guise. The power best placed to exploit that reality is China. While the countries of the Caucasus, Central, Inner, and South Asia generally want to escape Russia's grip, they are seeking too to emerge from China's ever increasing shadow. That, however, is hard to do when Moscow and Beijing have resolved to act in concord so far as it means denying to those smaller states the option of engagement with the West. If the nascent process of Western decline is to be arrested and reversed, a better understanding of the geopolitical relevance of Eurasia, and the struggle therein, and a concerted effort there, is crucial.

That dynamic understood, it is useful to look at the works of two other twentieth-century geostrategists for instructive examples of how best to formulate a Western strategy for the twenty-first century. George Kennan and Josef Pilsudski, though working independently, both proffered solutions to the essential challenge Mackinder identified. Kennan's "containment" and Pilsudski's "Prometheism-Intermarum" go far in helping to explain why, where, and how still-preponderant Western influence can and must be brought to bear to ensure its survival in the future. The conclusion is that a Twenty-First-Century Geopolitical Strategy for Eurasia (21CGSE) must employ the methodical and determined spread of Western institutions and good governance as the West's own greatest defense. In detail the strategy advocates a new realization of Mackinder's warning, prevention of Russian-Chinese condominium, and the expansion of Western institutions into the heart of Eurasia to anchor the West geopolitically, benefit those smaller states politically, and realize the potential of the old East-West trade corridor for the benefit of all powers concerned, including Russia and China.

The Twenty-First-Century Geopolitical Strategy for Eurasia reestablishes fundamental Western strategic objectives, the clarity of which has all too often become muddled by anxiety over short-term considerations. It sets out and communicates what is at stake for the West in the Eurasian theater and urges a robust forward strategy to further and protect essential Western values. With its focus on the "West." the strategy provides a joint framework for trans-Atlantic cooperation. Its most important policy implication is the restoration of geopolitical purpose to Western institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), among others, by arguing forcefully that their activities and expansion be refocused on Eurasia. A central facet the strategy promotes is the diffusion of good governance to ensure that the struggle for the fundamental theater in world politics is resolved in favor of Western democratic governance and market-based systems, without the domination of Eurasia by autocratic powers. However, although this idea-driven initiative is employed to rationalize the strategy, it is couched firmly in terms of its functionality in furthering an intrinsically realist project.

THE WORLD ISLAND

To understand the formative geopolitical trends that have shaped societies through the ages is to picture the world in its unconstrained whole. The dominant feature is the one mega-continent of Eurasia and Africa, popularly divided into Europe, the Middle East, East and South Asia, and Africa, but which really constitutes one land surrounded by

one giant interconnected ocean. This is the World Island—the single Great Continent, as distinct from Australasia, Antarctica, and the Americas, or more colloquially, the Old World as distinct from the New. To fully appreciate it is to view the world from above and imagine the absence of the north polar ice so as to make it possible to sail right around the Giant Continent of the World Island. This could be done on the interconnected oceans of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific, which together make up the Great Ocean enveloping the World Island. The peripheral nations of the World Island include Germany, Austria, Turkey, and India, together forming an inner or marginal crescent. At varying distances from the World Island in the Great Ocean are the islands of Britain, Japan, the Americas, and Australasia, which together form an outer or insular crescent. Though numerous and large in some cases, these lands yet pale into insignificance next to the vastness and population of the World Island.

Come the beginning of the twentieth century man had explored and laid claim to all the land of the World Island together with what lay over the oceans in the so-called New World. All that remained unclaimed was at the poles, but even that was known if not owned. Thus it was not so long ago that the world finally became a closed political system in which territorial expansion could only be achieved in a zero-sum struggle among the great powers. Such was the distribution of those great powers and antipathy between them that one could point to a particular region at which the fulcrum of world power was and had historically been poised. This was the Heartland, that closed land space, inaccessible to ships, that began in Eastern Europe and stretched eastwards almost but not quite to the Pacific forests of the Far East. From north to south the region extended from the Arctic Circle to the South Asian deserts and mountain ranges. Thus together with the core area occupied for the most part by Russia, at its greatest extent the Heartland took in the Baltic and Black seas, as well as the navigable Middle and Lower Danube, Asia Minor, Armenia, northern Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia. At the western boundary was the crucial 800-mile isthmus between the Black and Baltic seas, which constituted the eastern approach to European civilization.

Mighty Europe thus occupied only a slight proportion in an isolated peninsula of the vast Eurasian continent and was dwarfed by the size of the Heartland to the east. Yet Europeans from the Renaissance onwards had typically claimed for “their” continent the land all the way up to the rather arbitrary boundary of the Ural Mountains, deep in the Heartland. As set against one another, the relationship between the real Europe in its peninsular area and the Heartland was characterized by the precariously indefensible eastern approach to the former through that broad gap between the seas—and through which for centuries the nomadic peoples of the Heartland had surged, wreaking havoc amongst the civilizations

there, in contrast to which all European advances in the opposite direction had faded and retreated. Around the world the Europeans had been able to make their will felt by shipborne coercion, but the Heartland was inaccessible to this phenomenon. This meant that the power or combination of powers occupying the essential territory of the Heartland could marshal its resources without harassment from outside. It would therefore be a priority for any Heartland power or powers to secure access to the seas in order to deploy resources there. Herein lay the crux of Mackinder’s warning:

If the whole World Island, or the larger part of it, were to become a single united base of seapower, then would not the insular nations be out-built as regards ships and out-manned as regards seamen?

Mackinder’s underlying assumption was that “the grouping of lands and seas, and of fertility and natural pathways, is such as to lend itself to the growth of empires, and in the end of a single world-empire.” This was Mackinder’s fear at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet the utility of Mackinder’s analysis has not been lost over that century. Today his reasoning is as valid as ever, though we might adapt it for a world of submajor state violence for the time being. Zbigniew Brzezinski acknowledged the worth of Mackinder’s geography-based approach to understanding international relations in his seminal work *The Grand Chessboard*. Colin S. Gray, former defense and security adviser to both the British and American governments, has similarly acknowledged Mackinder as a conceptual starting point for much of his strategizing and policy prescriptions. Most recently, Gerry Kearns in his book *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, as well as Robert Kaplan in *Foreign Policy* magazine, have been vocal in reminding readers that they neglect the geographical paradigm rendered to us by Mackinder at their peril when trying to understand international relations past, present, and in the future. Gray and Kearns were recent participants in a BBC radio program that described the impact of Mackinder’s thinking through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The conclusion was that Heartland Theory has been nothing short of the preeminent concept underpinning Western foreign policy since Mackinder’s time. The irony, however, is that later generations of policy makers, commentators, and the interested public have lost focus of how the foreign policy precepts they have inherited have originated with Mackinder. In this way nonreasons have been crafted to explain things we have always known we “should” do, and a true understanding of Mackinder’s message has been lost to many. Today, Mackinder needs to be rediscovered before a sensible forward strategy for the West can be formulated.

Although these pages should not be read as portending major interstate violence in the near future, the economic struggle to develop the World

Island, and the geopolitical boost afforded to the powers that can do that, is very real. Today the smaller states of Eurasia sit astride the world's fastest growing trade corridor, with a vibrant demographic base and in possession of huge, but largely unexploited, energy and mineral reserves. Transit through this space along the ancient trade routes known to the classical world has the potential to connect disparate and voluminous markets on a giant east-west axis at a price that in many instances will undercut the corresponding route by sea. Authoritarianism and economic backwardness over centuries have allowed the sinews of this once vibrant transport network to atrophy and the region to become an obscurity despite its glaring size and functionality. Russia is concerned first and foremost that no Western actors succeed in revivifying this region that Moscow has maintained in a state of developmental stasis to be plundered at will. China has more constructive designs economically, but ones which similarly entail the retardation of good governance as it certainly has the potential to be adopted in those states. In this climate, Western actors need first to appreciate the full importance and potentialities of the World Island as described by Mackinder; to understand the motivations of the major powers there and the vulnerability of the weaker ones; and then to address to that situation a prudent, dynamic forward strategy for the West in the twenty first century.

KENNAN AND PILSUDSKI

George Kennan and Josef Pilsudski each developed a concept implicit in which was an understanding of the geopolitics of Eurasia as described by Mackinder. Pilsudski's focus was on Russia as the preeminent Heartland power undefeatable in the guise of its vast Czarist then Soviet Empire, but only to the extent that it was able to disperse into and create so many march lands out of its feebler neighbors in order to protect it from its strong ones. Pilsudski's Poland was one of Russia's weaker neighbors after the disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Not only that, but Poland sat between Russia and its strongest neighbor, Germany. For Pilsudski, the process whereby Russia had descended on the weak Eastern Europe nations in order to defend itself in depth from the strong Western ones, was plain. So too were the results: authoritarianism and economic stagnation. Pilsudski's response was therefore to foment discord amongst Russia's subject peoples as a prelude to splintering the empire and reducing it to its isolated Heartland stronghold, against which the small states could be allied in defense for the future. George Kennan similarly understood the process whereby the Russian geopolitical dilemma underpinned the Soviet Union's desire to fully mobilize the resources of its vast empire and expand throughout the World Island and across the seas. Kennan's response was to fence in

Russian (but also Communist Chinese) ambitions to a perimeter within which they could not tip the geopolitical balance decisively against the West. Containment was the policy that emerged as the best way to defend the West when it faced a powerful foe in an age that could contemplate seriously if not with equanimity the prospect of world war once more. In the more subtle climate of today's East-West struggle, Pilsudski can update Kennan in the fashioning of a twenty-first-century strategy to preserve and promote Western interests in the wider world.

WHY WESTERN?

Defining the "West" or "Western" is not something the 21CGSE attempts on an exhaustive basis. Rather, it uses the received understanding of those general norms of governance associated with the broader Euro-Atlantic community and which set that community apart historically and still today from many other quarters of the world. The Euro-Atlantic community is that grouping of states from Western Europe and North America whose institutions have dispersed widely and work now for the most part towards the complementary objectives of democratic governance, rule of law, free trade, and the protection of civil and human rights. In outline we might characterize the Western value set as elevating the importance of the individual above that of the state; this in contrast to the multifarious forms of authoritarianism to which Western ideals stand in opposition. The term "Western" has long been used and clearly understood in popular discourse. Although since the end of the Cold War the formal division between "Eastern" and "Western" military-oriented blocs has softened considerably, the essential dialectic between Western individualism as the basis for government and the authoritarian alternative remains. Indeed, some, such as Samuel Huntington, have argued that the label "Western" has in fact gained greater meaning in that time. That said, the 21CGSE does not subscribe to the stark categorization of civilizations for which Huntington argued. Although Huntington addressed the dynamic of Western integration in the Black Sea region in his *Clash of Civilizations*, his framework for understanding geopolitics—in which, for example, he distinguishes between "Western" and "Orthodox" civilizations, thereby dividing Central Europe—is wont to misunderstand not only the history of the greater Black Sea region but also the contemporary Western integrative dynamics at play in this area.

A better paradigm through which to understand the concept of the "West," and one that informs the 21CGSE, is Arnold J. Toynbee's more inclusive and self-critical analysis of the way in which history has seen the politics and economics of much of the world suffused with Western ideas and practice, whether for good or bad. Toynbee's analysis still traces the idea of "Westernism" from its Hellenic origins, through Roman and

Byzantine to Renaissance, Colonial, and modern Europe and the fissures of the Cold War. However, it does this with a healthy appreciation of the historically fluid nature of what it means to be Western. Toynbee's understanding does not focus exclusively on the geopolitical, but neither is it preoccupied with culture, nor brittle in its defense of "Western" values and traditions in a way that would limit any program for integration if applied too rigorously. Rather, it emphasizes the practical application of ideas based on reason and humanism. In the early twenty-first century it can be convincingly argued that these essential Western values are now universally recognized principles adopted by global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, to which nearly all states subscribe at least in outline. It is precisely these principles that require protection where they are truly established and promotion in the areas where their writ runs only in principle, not in practice. The most effective way of ensuring those goals is the implementation of a Western integrative process in the smaller states of Eurasia, a process that, although not an inherently confrontational or anti-Eastern dynamic, must be clear about its opposition to authoritarianism.

IDEAS AND GEOPOLITICS

Viewing the world in staunchly geopolitical terms has long been considered a trait of autocratic regimes themselves—the practice of *realpolitik*, overly concerned with the control of territory and resources, generally to the exclusion of values and ideas. The chief criticism says that geopolitics is a prism unable to account for the full range of motivations impelling action at the international level, perhaps because it fails to acknowledge much of what happens at the substate level. That said, the lens of geopolitics has provided an accurate enough explanation of the great structural trends in the international system of the twentieth century, and it has much to teach us about those which are unfolding in the twenty-first. Pioneering institutions such as the European Union have tempted some in the West into thinking they perceive the decline of international relations as we know it, specifically, the exercise of power by the powerful to leverage their relations with the weak—or what might be thought of as the democratization of international relations. However, the European nations are unique in being so many in such a compact space, and yet with such a proximate and interwoven experience of history as to be independent but practice nearly identical forms of government and economic organization. Elsewhere in the world that cohesion does not exist, and the lack of familiarity, through either violent or peaceful experience, means that suspicions run much higher and the costs of potential conflict are more readily accepted for the benefits the results or threat thereof might beget. In this climate, Western democracies

will forever be at a disadvantage if they do not see the world in the terms so clearly dictating the strategies of many powers, specifically the great Eastern ones of Eurasia. Yet geopolitics does not make the power of ideas redundant. The 21CGSE is fundamentally not concerned with promoting the narrow interests of any one state nor simply those of an elite group of states. Rather, it is concerned with the preservation and promotion of a set of values, albeit by realist means, best delineated in geopolitical terms. Geopolitics here is not therefore in conflict with the pivotal role of ideas in world politics, but rather it furnishes the tools with which to achieve the victory of ideas over authoritarianism—an idealess form of regressive order.

The bureaucrat and professional pessimist may dismiss the recommendations of the 21CGSE as inconsistent with the spirit of foreign relations as pursued by the West since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That trend has been marked by the avoidance of great power confrontation and the abandonment of the smaller states of the world to recalibrate themselves, even when many of their fundamental problems derive from the actions of the great powers in the first place. In the round, it has been a period guided more by vague hope than concrete calculation. Should Western policy makers in North America and Europe not now begin to think more geopolitically, to view geopolitics in terms of the paramount importance of the World Island, and in the coming years not make every effort to implement the policy imperatives which the 21CGSE is intended to address, the preeminence and power of the West will diminish far more rapidly than many might expect. Whether, and how, to engage in Eurasia is therefore the West's existential question.