

# The Geopolitical Thought of Sir Halford Mackinder, The Apostle of Amphibious Power<sup>1</sup>

Pascal Venier

Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) is generally considered as one of the founding fathers of Geopolitics.<sup>2</sup> His famous article ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’ (1904) is seen as a decisive epistemological moment for Mackinder was the first, or at least one of the first to envisage international relations globally.<sup>3</sup> The trilogy formed by this article, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), and ‘The Round World and the Winning of the Peace’ (1943) is a central element of the geopolitical canon.<sup>4</sup> It inspired the whole school of classical Geopolitics, which has had a strong influence in the definition of the American ‘Grand Strategy’ as much during the Cold War as after it came to an end.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to stress how Mackinder himself strongly rejected the use of the term ‘Geopolitics’ to speak about his own work. During the Second World War, he put down on paper what he thought of the work of the German General and Geopolitician Karl Haushofer, who had found inspiration in his own writings. At that time, the Geopolitik developed by Haushofer was the subject of much interest, which led to the birth in the United States of a school of Geopolitics and Geostrategy. In a hitherto unpublished document kept at the Bodleian Library in

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Pascal Venier, "La pensée géopolitique de Sir Halford Mackinder, l'apôtre de la puissance amphibie", in Hervé Coutau-Bégarie et Martin Motte (sous la direction de ), *Approches de la géopolitique, de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Paris, Economica, 2013, pp. 483-507.

<sup>2</sup> On the life and works of Mackinder, see W. H. Parker, *Mackinder, Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982 ; Brian Blouet, *Halford Mackinder : A Biography*, College Station, Tx: Texas A&M University Press, 1987 ; B. Blouet (dir.), *Global Geostrategy, Mackinder and the Defence of the West*, Londres, Frank Cass, 2005, et Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire : The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford University Press, 2009. Among the many articles written on Mackinder the following are of a particular interest : Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Putting Mackinder in his place : Material transformations and myth", *Political Geography*, v. 11, n° 1, janvier 1992, pp. 100-118, and Geoffrey Sloan, "Sir Halford Mackinder : The Heartland Theory Then and Now", in Colin S. Gray and G. Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*, Londres, Frank Cass, 1999, pp. 15-38.

<sup>3</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, 1904, pp. 421–437.

<sup>4</sup> H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality, a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Londres, Constable and Company, 1919, and "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace", *Foreign Affairs*, 1943, volume 21, pp. 595-605.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, Newhaven, Institute of International Studies, Yale University, 1944 ; C. S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era : Heartland, Rimlands and the Technological Revolution*, New York, Crane, Russak, 1977 ; C. S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1988 ; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Game Plan : A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the US-Soviet Contest*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986 ; Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard : American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1997.

Oxford, Mackinder was expressing very clearly his views on the matter: “*Geopolitics*” is a new word which comes to us from Germany. It is not the name of a science but of a philosophy. For a science ascertains facts but a philosophy estimates values. There can only be one science of Geography but there may be German Geopolitics, British Geopolitics, Russian Geopolitics, varying according to the national point of view, which again may from time to time change’ Mackinder also had reservations towards those who called into question the conceptual unity of Geography: ‘There is a school of geographers which says that there is no such subject as geography but rather a number of “geo” subjects – geophysics, geopolitik, and so on.’ He was quite rightly extremely harsh towards Haushofer, who in his view, had ‘has prostituted to the extreme [his] teaching which has passed into propaganda’, and ‘in that he is in the company of all the Nazi faculties’. His conclusion was that ‘Geopolitik as interpreted by these writers is merely an attempt to justify the enslavement of the world to the Nazi domination’.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Mackinder rejected German Geopolitik and even the term Geopolitics, it nevertheless remains that his approach very much coincide with what is commonly named Geopolitics or Geostrategy nowadays, and his work is seen as foundational by proponents of these disciplines.

It seems to go without saying in the studies written about Mackinder that he intended to be the Apostle of land-power, just as Mahan was that of Sea-Power: the fact that as distinguished a historian as the Anglo-American Paul Kennedy has no hesitation in using a title for a chapter of his great classic *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* ‘Mahan versus Mackinder’ is in this respect most symptomatic.<sup>7</sup> Likewise the geopolitical thought of Mackinder is most of the time summarized by a formula that of the ‘Heartland Theory’.<sup>8</sup> There is no question that the reading of his works by the school of classical Geopolitics has led to the enunciation of an extremely well-structured theory of the Heartland. The question, however, needs to be asked whether such a theory can actually be found in the works of Mackinder. It is quite strange, thinking about it, that such a theory, on which so much has been written and which is glorified by some and vilified by others, has not yet really been subjected to an in-depth critical examination. The fact is, as we will see that the concept of the Heartland is somewhat problematic in Mackinder’s work, because it has metamorphosed over time, both as far as its limits are concerned, but also the characteristics assigned to it. A work of exegesis and reinterpretation is therefore necessary. Thus, we intend to go back to Mackinder’s three key texts. After prolonging an outline of the main stages of Mackinder’s career, it will be a matter of analyzing the texts of his geopolitical

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<sup>6</sup> Bodleian Library, Papiers Mackinder, MP/C/4.00, Notes manuscrites non datées.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, Londres, Allen Lane, 1976, pp. 177-202.

<sup>8</sup> G. Sloan, art. cit., p. 15.

trilogy before returning to the way in which the British Geographer envisaged the global configuration in 1904, 1919 and 1943.

[The first section of the chapter i.e. a 2,000 words biographical sketch which was a requirement in the series has not been translated.]

## **MACKINDER'S GEOPOLITICAL TRILOGY**

### **'The Geographical Pivot of History' (1904)**

Mackinder's objective in 'The Geographical Pivot of History' was extremely ambitious as he was seeking '*a formula*' expressing '*certain aspects, at any rate, of geographical causation in universal history*'.<sup>9</sup> In this work, which belonged both with historical geography and political geography, Mackinder took the risk to present a very bold hypothesis: according to him the vast region of south Asian continental drainage and of arctic drainage had been for a long time 'the geographical pivot of history', the central space from where the great invasions which had taken place in the history of the Old Continent had been launched. This zone, he called '*heart-land*' (with a hyphen) was likely to remain the '*pivot region of the world's politics*'. Mackinder claimed that consequently the European history was subordinate to Asian history. Such a reflection on universal history and on international relations had a particularly iconoclastic character and was conceived as a way to demonstrate the pertinence of geography for political decisions makers.

A crucial dimension of the article was the way in which Mackinder conducted an assessment of the international position of the United Kingdom, by analyzing a number of serious potential threats. The first of such perils he thought he observed was the trend towards a break in the equilibrium between sea-power and land-power. Since the great European navigators in the 16th and 17th centuries, the balance had shifted in favour of the former, but the recent development of railways mobility was a game changer: a challenge against Britain's world hegemony by the continental powers of the continent was taking shape. The second peril came logically from this trend reversal: Russia that Mackinder saw as the '*pivot state*' par excellence was an immediate direct threat to British interests. Conducting a long-range reflection, the geographer considered that this country thus played a role which was similar to the role played by the Mongol empire in the past: '*Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India, and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen. In the world at large*

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<sup>9</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", art. cit., pp. 421-437.

*she occupies the central strategical position held by Germany in Europe.*<sup>10</sup> The risk of an alliance between the two main continental powers represented in Mackinder's view a third major peril, which was truly a worst-case scenario: *'The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia.'*<sup>11</sup> It is important to stress that the potential threats identified by Mackinder were either Russia or Russia allied with Germany, but never Germany alone, which although she enjoyed *'central strategical position [...] in Europe'*, only represented a secondary threat. Mackinder's interpretation seemed remarkably in tune with the thinking of the main British decision makers at the time when it was published. It is quite clear that Russia, involved in a global rivalry with Britain remained at the time in the eyes of London the main threat against British interests.<sup>12</sup>

### **Democratic Ideals and Reality (1919): Situation and Problems**

Fifteen years later, in *Democratic Ideals and Reality, a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Mackinder conducted an analysis of the situation in the aftermath of the *'long War'* caused, he felt, by the slow accumulation of tension in the years which had preceded its outbreak.<sup>13</sup> Far from being blinded by the euphoria of victory, he was warning the Allies by stressing that they *'had almost been defeated'*.<sup>14</sup> He recalled that *'Had Germany won, if only on land, you would have had to reckon with a Heartland Empire'*.<sup>15</sup> He stressed the importance of realities, especially geographical.<sup>16</sup> The great wars in history were in his view *'the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations'*, which was not *'wholly due to the greater genius and energy of some nations as compared with others. [...] in large measure it is the result of the uneven distribution of fertility and strategical opportunity upon the face of our globe'*.<sup>17</sup> The geographical realities were such that they lent themselves *'to the growth of empires, and in the end of a single World Empire'*.<sup>18</sup> Such realities could be hidden by idealism, another fundamental element for Mackinder. He noted that *'To the eighteenth-century ideal of Liberty,*

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<sup>10</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", art. cit., p. 436.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>12</sup> Pascal Venier, "The Geographical Pivot of History and Early 20th Century Geopolitical Culture", *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 170, n° 4, December 2004, pp. 330-336.

<sup>13</sup> H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

and the nineteenth-century ideal of Nationality, we have added our twentieth-century ideal of the League of Nations.<sup>19</sup> A corollary to this democratic idealism was ‘hope in Universal Democracy’.<sup>20</sup>

Mackinder was very well aware of how serious were the problems which could arise in the aftermath of the war. He did not hesitate in stating that ‘our hardest test has yet to come’.<sup>21</sup> The first danger was that ‘The temptation of the moment is to believe that unceasing peace will ensue merely because tired men are determined that there shall be no more war.’<sup>22</sup> His forecast was that ‘international tension will accumulate again, though slowly at first’ and he warned against the idealist temptation to repudiate the idea of the balance of power.<sup>23</sup> He then mentioned the ‘geographical temptation’: the Heartland constituted the ‘the persistent Geographical threat to World liberty’ as, ‘the Heartland offers the basis of an all-powerful militarism’, and opened ‘the possibility of a world tyranny’.<sup>24</sup> The power in control of the Heartland could conquer what he called the ‘World-Island’, that is the whole formed by Europe, Asia and Africa, and from there the entire world. He was summarizing his thesis in an axiomatic formula which has remained famous:

*‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World-Island commands the World’.*<sup>25</sup>

After the wars of the French Revolution and Empire, after the First World War, Mackinder really feared a ‘third tragedy’, that is that democratic idealism would lose its sense of reality as French idealism and national idealism had done in the past.<sup>26</sup> He therefore asked a key question: ‘in our anxiety to repudiate the ideas historically associated with the Balance of Power, is there not perhaps some danger that we should allow merely juridical conceptions to rule our thoughts in regard to the League of Nations<sup>27</sup>?’

## **Democratic Ideals and Reality: solutions**

Against the challenges of the hour, Mackinder thought that ‘the time has at last

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1 et 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 271, 212 et 271.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

*come to take larger views', it was necessary to 'soberly marrying our new Idealism to Reality', and to that end 'recognise these geographical realities and take steps to counter their influence' in order to 'remove the temptation and opening to World-Empire'.<sup>28</sup>*

Mackinder was defining the prerequisites for an *'international reconstruction'*, starting with *'a complete solution of the Eastern Question in its largest sense'*.<sup>29</sup> It was out of the question to accept any result for the war which would not solve once and for all the problems between Germans and Slavs in Eastern Europe.<sup>30</sup> *'A balance [between them] and true independence of each'* was absolutely necessary and would necessitate *'the adequate subdivision of Eastern Europe'*.<sup>31</sup> Therefore *'The condition of stability in the territorial rearrangement of East Europe is that the division should be into three and not into two State-systems. It is a vital necessity that there should be a tier of independent States between Germany and Russia.'*<sup>32</sup> [...] *'seven independent States, with a total of more than sixty million people, traversed by railways linking them securely with one another, and having access through the Adriatic, Black, and Baltic Seas with the Ocean, will together effectively balance the Germans of Prussia and Austria.'*<sup>33</sup> Mackinder thought that *'This great deed of International Statesmanship accomplished, and there would appear to be no impossibility of realising the democratic ideal, the League of Nations'*.<sup>34</sup>

The *'international reconstruction'* itself required a League of Nations which would be effective and powerful. For Mackinder this *'supreme organ of united humanity must closely watch the Heartland and its possible organisers'*.<sup>35</sup> Entrusted with a world mandate, *'the League of Nations should have the right under International Law of sending War fleets into the Black and Baltic Seas'*.<sup>36</sup> In effect, *'The Islanders of the world cannot be indifferent to the fate either of Copenhagen or of Constantinople, or yet of the Kiel Canal, for a great Power in the Heartland and East Europe could prepare, within the Baltic and Black Seas, for War on the Ocean'*.<sup>37</sup> Echoing the views expressed by Mahan before the war, he thought the Democratic Ideal and geographical realities could *'be reconciled in the*

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 8-9, 2-3., 222

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 194 et 222.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207 et 214-215.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

*cases of Panama, Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Aden, and Singapore by regarding the American Republic and the British Empire as World Trustees for the peace of the Ocean and of the straits connecting the basins of the Ocean*'.<sup>38</sup>

### **'The Round World and the Winning of the Peace' (1943)**

A quarter of a century later, during the Second World War Mackinder published 'The Round World and the Winning of the Peace'. Whilst he avoided '*forecasting the future of humanity*', he offered analysis of '*conditions under which we set about winning the peace when victory in the war has been achieved*'.<sup>39</sup> He considered that to correctly grasp the configuration of the world after the war, it was particularly important to carefully distinguish '*between idealistic blueprints and realistic and scholarly maps presenting concepts – political, economic, strategic, and so forth – based on the recognition of obstinate facts*'.<sup>40</sup> Firstly, he reevaluated the pertinence of the concept of the Heartland. He was thus taking his distances with his thesis of the geographical pivot of History. Not only did he give up on his famous axiom of 1919, but also as Saul Cohen has very sharply observed, the concept of the World Island.<sup>41</sup> He considered that his Heartland concept was '*more valid and useful today than it was either twenty or forty years ago*'.<sup>42</sup> He revised its limits, which were now that of the '*Russian Heartland*', that is the useful part of the Soviet territory, located west of the Yenisei River.<sup>43</sup>

Mackinder presented a second geographical concept that of the Midland Ocean, that is the North Atlantic with its three strategic components '*a bridgehead in France, a moated aerodrome in Britain, and a reserve of trained manpower, agriculture and industries in the eastern United States and Canada*'. In his view, it was no longer only a matter of winning the war, as it was in 1919, but also and above all to win the peace. Permanently solving the German question, in order to avoid the resurgence of a Reich harbouring a hegemonic ambition, required the establishment of '*strong embankments of power on either hand – land power to the east, in the Heartland, and sea power to the west, in the North Atlantic Basin*'. Germany would draw the lessons from the '*enduring certainty that any war fought by Germany must be a war on two unshakable fronts*'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>39</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace", art. cit., pp. 595-605.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 602.

<sup>41</sup> Saul Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*, New York, Random House, 1963, p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace", art. cit., p. 603.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 599.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 604.

To that end, Mackinder thought it was necessary for the four powers he hoped would win the war, the United States, Britain, France and the USSR to make a commitment to '*cooperate immediately if any breach of the peace is threatened, so that the devil in Germany can never again get its head up and must die by inanition*'.<sup>45</sup> He was expressing his regrets that '*the alliance, negotiated after Versailles, between the United States, the United Kingdom and France was not implemented*'.<sup>46</sup> He was stressing the necessity of establishing an '*effective and lasting cooperation*' between those three countries, taking great care not to mention the possibility of a deterioration of relations with the Soviet ally.<sup>47</sup>

## **THE GLOBAL CONFIGURATIONS ACCORDING TO MACKINDER**

### **The Natural Seats of Power (1904)**

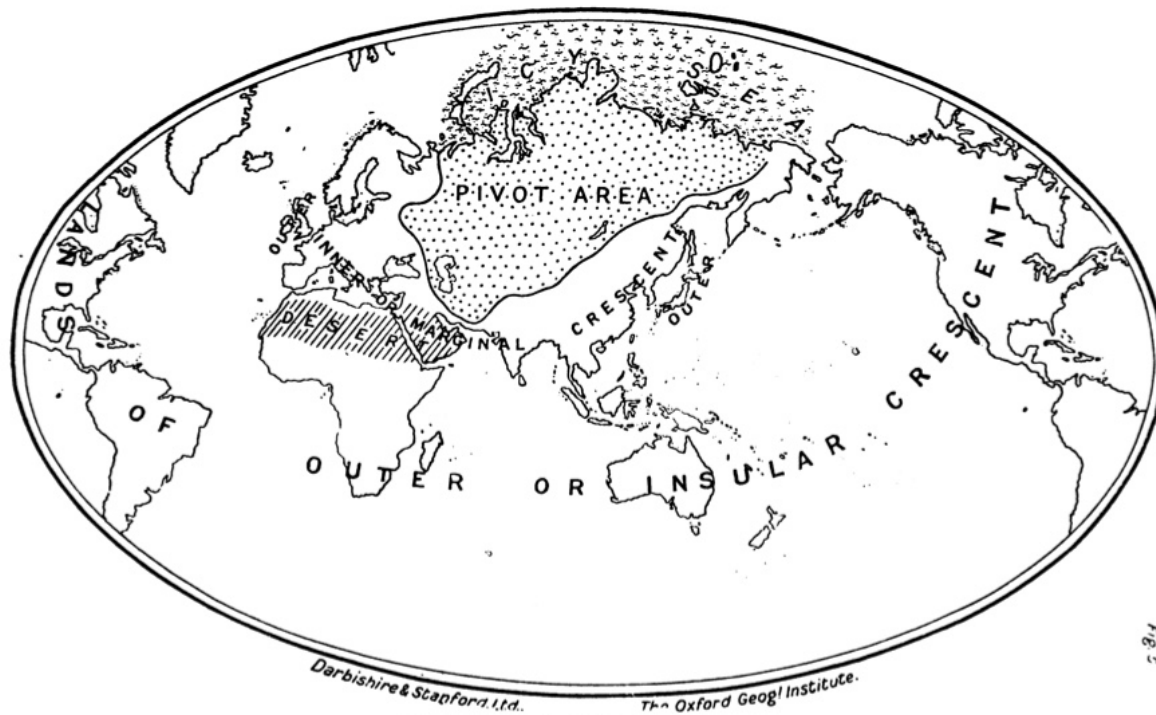
In 1904, Mackinder based his interpretation of the international system on his hypothesis of the Geographical Pivot of History. A map of the natural seats of power was presented not only to support his argument, but as a most important part of the said argument.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 602.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 603.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.



**THE NATURAL SEATS OF POWER.**  
 Pivot area—wholly continental. Outer crescent—wholly oceanic. Inner crescent—partly continental, partly oceanic.

Fig. 1. The Natural Seats of Power  
 (H.J. Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', p. 435)

A first fundamental political reality for Mackinder was 'the pivot region of the world's politics', that is the 'vast area of Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to the horse-riding nomads, and is to-day about to be covered with a network of railways'.<sup>48</sup> Because it occupies this central position which had been in the past that of the Mongol Empire, Russia 'can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides, save the north'.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, thanks to the rapid development of its railways system, Russia was according to Mackinder in the process of acquiring a mobility which was such that it would allow her to eventually expand on the periphery of Eurasia. A breakdown in the equilibrium which would result would make possible an 'empire of the world', especially as Russia could ally herself with Germany and gain access to the open seas.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Mackinder key argument revolved around the notion of Pivot State

<sup>48</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", art. cit., pp. 432 et 434.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>50</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", art. cit., pp. 436-437.

irrespective of the protagonists involved: *‘The particular combinations of power brought into balance are not material; my contention is that from a geographical point of view they are likely to rotate round the pivot state, which is always likely to be great, but with limited mobility as compared with the surrounding marginal and insular powers’*.<sup>51</sup>

Around the pivot zone laid the peripheral region of Eurasia, which Mackinder labelled the *‘inner or marginal crescent’*. This crescent included four distinct regions: Europe, India, South East Asia as well as what he called the *‘Land of the Five Seas’* or the Nearer East, in other words, South Western Asia, bordered by the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. He stressed that *‘it partakes of the characteristics both of the marginal belt and of the central area of Euro-Asia [...] suitable for the operations of the nomad. Dominantly, however, it is marginal, for sea-gulfs and oceanic rivers lay it open to sea-power, and permit of the exercise of such power from it.’*<sup>52</sup>

Mackinder took into consideration a second fundamental reality which was *‘the one and continuous ocean enveloping the divided and insular lands’*. The whole naval strategy and politics at that time such as enunciated by Mahan and Wilkinson aimed at the command of the seas.<sup>53</sup> Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia and Japan formed *‘a ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce, inaccessible to the land-power of Euro-Asia’*. Mackinder named this ring the *‘outer crescent’* by opposition to the *‘inner crescent’*, already mentioned.<sup>54</sup> He was to look again at the idea of concentric circles to represent the centre and the periphery and push it further in 1919, but using concepts and terms which were quite different.

### **The global configuration in 1919: The World Island and its satellites**

Whilst in 1904 Mackinder was presenting his hypothesis of the Geographical Pivot of History, it disappeared in 1919. The word ‘pivot’ is completely absent in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. More broadly, he offered quite a different reading of the world. Envisioning it globally, in a chapter revealingly entitled *‘The Seaman’s point of view,’* he was thinking it on a large scale, as a set of islands of various importance. For him, *‘the joint continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa, is now effectively, and not merely theoretically, an island’*.<sup>55</sup> Around this World Island

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 436-437.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 433-434.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>55</sup> H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideas and Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

to which he assigned a central position, a series of satellite islands gravitated, even '*North and South America, slenderly connected at Panama, are for practical purposes insular rather than peninsular in regard to one another*'.<sup>56</sup>

Mackinder thought that using a map to apprehend such a reality would not be pertinent, because it would be misleading, as what he meant to show '*can only be appreciated on a globe*'.<sup>57</sup> He therefore resorted to using two diagrams showing in the form of circles of various sizes respectively the relative areas and the population of the World Island and its satellites (in this case North America, South America, Malaya and Australia) and the relative populations of the World Island and its satellites (in that case Britain, North America, South America, Japan, Malaya and Australia). In both instances, the preponderance of the World Island was striking.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

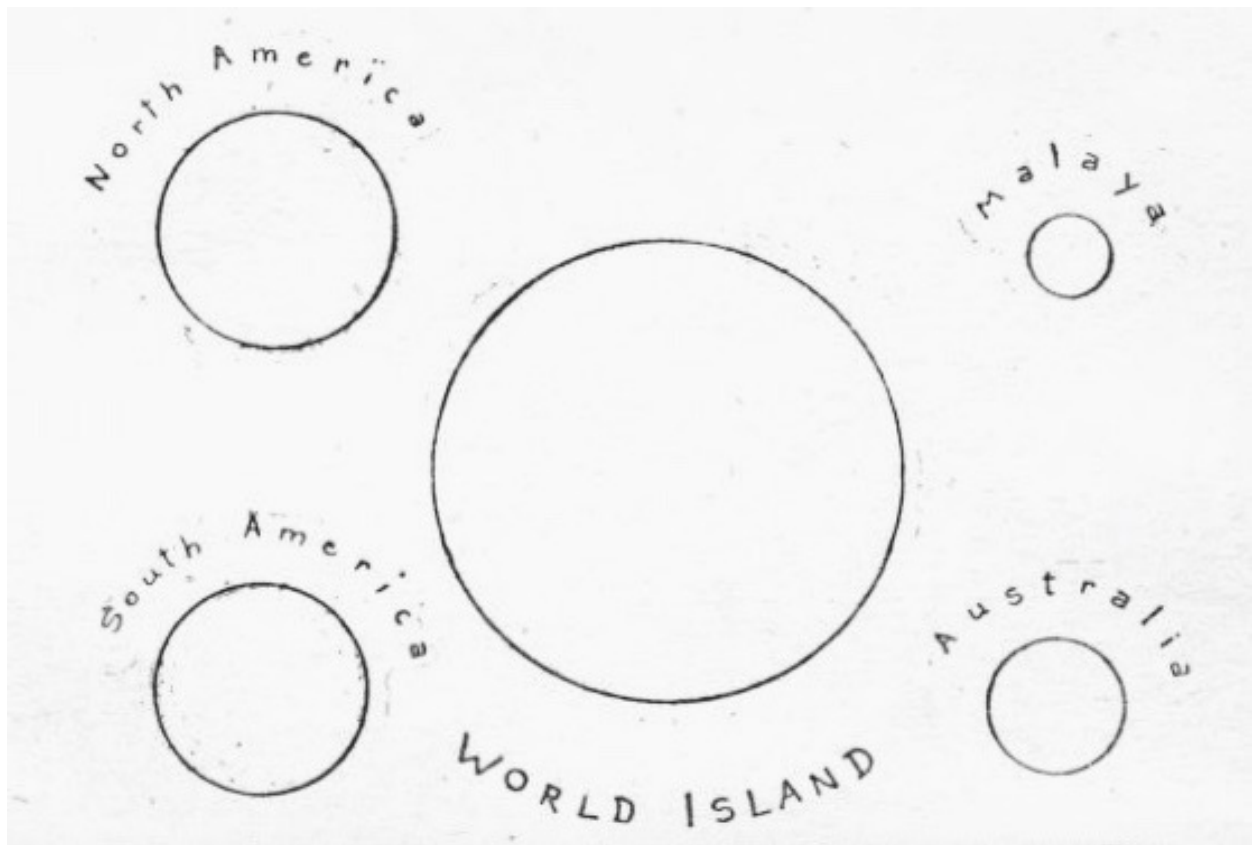


Figure 2. Relative areas of the World Island and its satellites  
 (H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 86)

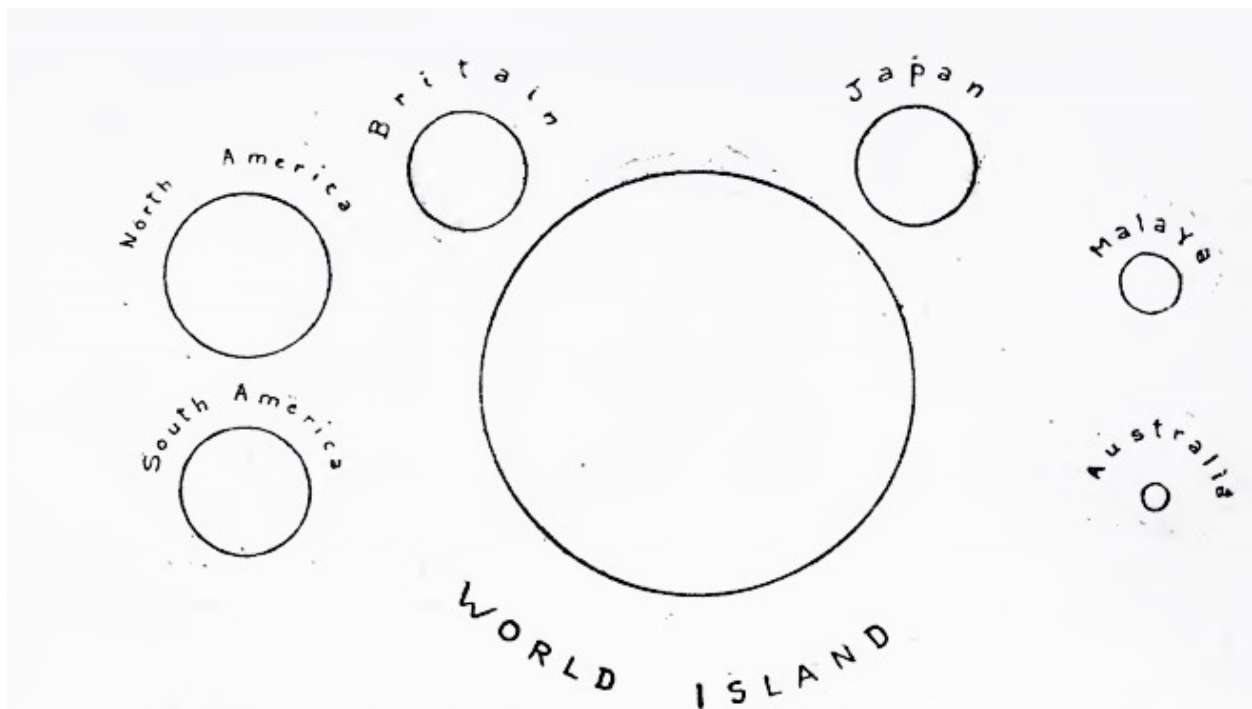


Figure 3. Relative populations of the World Island and its satellites  
(H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 90)

### **The World configuration in 1919: The World-Island divided into six natural regions**

In another chapter of *Democratic Ideals and Reality* entitled '*The Landsman point of view*', Mackinder presented a map of the World-Island divided into six natural regions, that is the European Coastland, the Heartland, the Sahara, Arabia, the Monsoon Coastland, as well as sub-Saharan Africa, described as the '*second Heartland*' or the '*Southern Heartland*' since, like the Northern Heartland, its interior regions not accessible to the sea-power.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, he presented a new representation of the Heartland.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104 et suiv.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101 et 135.



Fig. 4. The World Island and its six natural regions  
 (H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, pp. 100-101)

Mackinder had only used the word heart-land twice in his article of 1904, but the word Heartland, with in uppercase and without a hyphen was now recurrent in his analysis. The concept was incidentally deeply transformed, as he introduced a distinction between two conceptions of the Heartland. First, he described ‘*the Heartland of the Continent*’ or ‘*Northern Heartland*’.<sup>60</sup> This space essential feature was that it was ‘*inaccessible to navigation from the ocean*’ and it was defined according to criteria which were strictly geographical: ‘*The Heartland, in the sense of the region of Arctic and Continental drainage, includes most of the Great*

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96 et 270.

*Lowland and most of the Iranian Upland*'.<sup>61</sup> Mackinder considered that 'the opening of it by railways – for it was practically roadless beforehand, – and by aeroplane routes in the near future, constitutes a revolution in the relations of men to the larger geographical realities of the world.'<sup>62</sup> He therefore had no hesitation in claiming that 'nature there offers all the prerequisites of ultimate dominance in the world'.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 5. The Heartland (1919)  
(H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 135)

Together with this first concept came a second one, which partly overlapped,

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96 et 98.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>63</sup> H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, *op. cit.*, pp. 221.

that is ‘the Heartland strategically defined’<sup>64</sup>: ‘*We defined the Heartland originally in accordance with river drainage; but does not history [...] show that for the purposes of strategical thought it should be given a somewhat wider extension? Regarded from the point of view of human mobility, and of the different modes of mobility, it is evident that since land-power can to-day close the Black Sea – this is an allusion to the First World War when the allied fleets were not able to force their way through the Dardanelles – the whole basin of that sea must be regarded as of the Heartland.*’<sup>65</sup> Mackinder was extending the limits of the Heartland to include the Black Sea and its bordering lands, Asia minor, and the Balkans Peninsula, as well as the Baltic Basin, about which the same reasoning could be applied.

A careful reading of *Democratic Ideals and Reality* also reveals – and this fact has until now escaped all Mackinder exegetes – that there is nowhere in this text any mention of the central character of the Heartland in world politics, either explicitly or implicitly. Much to the contrary, Mackinder assigns a central role to another region which he calls Arabia, or also the ‘*Arabian Centreland*’,<sup>66</sup> and which coincides with what we would name nowadays the Middle East. It must be stressed that the term ‘Centreland’ has remained completely unnoticed in the works on Mackinder, because the author does not use it in the body of the text but only in the detailed analysis which is found at the end of the book.<sup>67</sup> The importance of the Arabia had to do with the fact that it was the heart of the World-Island and was the articulation between its three parts, Europe, Africa and Asia.<sup>68</sup> This also largely reflected the fact that the Great War had allowed the United Kingdom to become preponderant in this region, whose future was to be decided at the conference of Paris, which gave her the status of trustee power in Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, when she already had a protectorate over both Egypt and Cyprus.

## **The Round World in 1943**

In ‘The Round World and the Winning of the Peace’, Mackinder was trying to produce an overview of the world useful to help think what Americans had started calling ‘*Grand Strategy*’, to that end, he wanted to sketch a ‘*picture of the pattern of the round world*’.<sup>69</sup> The British Geographer, however, did not offer a map or even a diagram this time. A likely explanation is provided in the title of the article,

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139-140

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100 et 270.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114 et suiv.

<sup>69</sup> H. J. Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace”, art. cit., p. 603.

which mentioned ‘the round world’. It reminds us of the argument Mackinder had developed in 1919, when he commented that what he was describing could only really be appreciated on a globe.

Mackinder was defining five highly significant geographical concepts. Firstly, he was emphasizing a ‘*twin unit*’, of fundamental importance, that is the Heartland and the Midland Ocean or ‘*the North Atlantic – and its dependent seas and river basins*’. These two regions were surrounded by a ‘girdle of deserts and wildernesses’ which stretched from the Sahara to the semi-arid west of the United States through the deserts of Arabia, Iran, Tibet and Mongolia, then central and Eastern Siberia, Alaska and the Laurentian shield of Canada. Beyond this belt, he identified an Outer World, which comprises the Great Ocean – That is the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the South Atlantic Ocean – and its bordering countries.<sup>70</sup> Around the South Atlantic could be found ‘*the tropical rain-forests of South America and Africa*’.<sup>71</sup>

British geographer Peter Taylor has pertinently emphasized how in this representation of the world, it was Germany which now occupied a central position, since it was located between the Midland Ocean and the Heartland.<sup>72</sup> Mackinder, as was said, wished that Germany would be closely controlled by the two groupings.<sup>73</sup> He was, however, not without stressing that ‘*if the Soviet Union emerges from this war as conqueror of Germany, she must rank as the greatest land Power on the globe. Moreover, she will be the Power in the strategically strongest defensive position. The Heartland is the greatest natural fortress on earth. For the first time in history it is manned by a garrison sufficient both in number and quality.*’ Without emphasizing too much upon the threat which the Soviet Union would represent, on account of the Great Alliance, Mackinder stressed how the three powers of the Midland Ocean complemented one another strategically: the US provided a ‘*depth of defense*’, Britain was a ‘moated forward stronghold – a Malta on a grander scale,’ and France was a continental ‘bridgehead’ for the Anglo-Saxon powers, a role ‘*no less essential than the other two, because sea power must in the final resort be amphibious if it is to balance land-power*’.<sup>74</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It seems useful to come back at the end of this study to what Mackinder

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 603.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 605.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Taylor, “Unity and Division in Global Political Geography”, in Ian Douglas (dir.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Geography : The Environment and Humankind*, 2002, p. 337.

<sup>73</sup> H. J. Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace”, art. cit., p. 604.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

understood by the Heartland, from the hypothesis of 1904 to the thesis of 1919, reaffirmed in 1943. In ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, the British geographer identified a region which was equivalent to the region of continental and arctic drainage of ‘Euro-Asia’, what he called the ‘*heart of Asia*’ and the ‘*heart-land*’.<sup>75</sup> He ventured in formulating not a thesis but a ‘*working hypothesis*’ which was extremely iconoclastic as it claimed that this region was nothing less than the ‘*geographical pivot of history*’ and was more than ever the ‘*pivot region of the world’s politics*’, as transcontinental railways weren’t the process of ‘*transmuting the conditions of land-power*’.<sup>76</sup>

In 1919, Mackinder still paid close attention to this region, which he now referred to using the term Heartland. He was defining a geographical heartland, whose limits were largely those of the ‘*pivot region*’ from 1904, but taking into account the new strategical conditions, he considered that it was necessary to also include the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, as the land-power was now able to close the two seas in question. Therefore the geographical Heartland and Eastern Europe formed “*the Heartland in the strategical sense*”.<sup>77</sup> A very important fact, unfortunately usually overlooked in the literature on Mackinder is that he gave up on the ‘Geographical Pivot of History’ formula. Moreover, whilst he only formulated a working hypothesis in 1904, he was going much further in 1919, when he was putting forward a real thesis:

*‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World-Island commands the World’*.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, in his update of 1943, Mackinder reaffirmed the pertinence of the Heartland as a strategic concept.

Although the Heartland does play a key role in Mackinder’s geopolitical trilogy, it is quite crucial not to lose sight of the fact that the true issue in the struggle between land-power and sea-power is located elsewhere in his view, in the spaces which he refers to as ‘*marginal regions, ranged in a vast crescent, accessible to shipmen*’ and ‘*marginal lands of Euro-Asia*’.<sup>79</sup> Political scientist, Nicholas Spykman, one of the best interpreters of the thought of Mackinder has very well stressed the importance of this peripheral zone in *The Geography of the Peace*

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<sup>75</sup> H. J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, art. cit., pp. 431 et 436.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.

<sup>77</sup> H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>79</sup> H. J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, art. cit., p. 431 and 436.

(1944), which he refers to with his concept of Rimland.<sup>80</sup> Whilst he is sometimes criticized on this account, he does not seem to betray Mackinder's thinking, but much to the contrary to follow the same logic. It is true that Mackinder did not use the word Rimland in his three great classics. He, however, does speak of 'Rim' about the coasts of Eurasia in a course on the History and Geography of International Relations, which he gave in 1888 for the Oxford University Extension.<sup>81</sup> His point of view remains that of a representative of a great sea-power and this is what he is primarily interested in the regions accessible from the sea.

A key which is very helpful to understand Mackinder's reasoning is the idea of stimulating pressure, which is developed in his article of 1904: through various examples in the past, he shows how the 'common necessity of resistance to external force' plays a fundamental role in the process of formation of both nations and civilizations.<sup>82</sup> The 'pivot region' or 'heart-land' of 1904, then the 'Heartland' of 1919 and 1943 are in this respect the myth against which the imperial unity of the Edwardian period, the League of Nations in the aftermath of the Great War, the Atlantic Alliance or the United Nations at the end of the Second World War must be formed. Mackinder stresses each time the threat represented by the land power for the interest of the sea power. The latter has no choice but to adapt to survive—the evolutionist influence is obvious here—, contain its adversary, prevent a Eurasian hegemony which would allow for the development of a fleet and for her to become in turn the main sea-power. From this dialectic between the land power and the sea power emerges the necessity for the former to project power on the margins of Eurasia. Therefore, far from being the apostle of land power, who deserves to be opposed to Admiral Mahan, the Apostle of sea power, Mackinder, like Castex, intends to be the apostle of amphibious power.

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<sup>80</sup> N. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, *op. cit.* Sur Spykman, voir dans ce volume l'article d'Olivier Zajec.

<sup>81</sup> Part of his syllabus was on "The inhabited rim of the Old World" and he spoke of "*The rim broken into two parts (W. Europe and the Monsoon Lands) by the belt of deserts*". H. J. Mackinder, *Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on the History and Geography of International Politics*, Oxford University Extension lectures, 1888, n.p.

<sup>82</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *art. cit.*, pp. 422-423.