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# Exploring the Geopolitics of the 21st Century

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## November 2020

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# China, the U.S., and the Geography of the 21st Century

**"Each century has had its own geographical perspective."**

*Sir Halford J. Mackinder, Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction (1919)*

The geographical perspective of the 21st century is just now being formed. And at its heart is a rivalry between China and the United States to succeed Europe's 500-year centrality in the international system, which will be framed by a shift in global economic activity and trade, new energy resource competition, a weakening Europe and Russia, and a technological battle to control information. The new map of the next century will extend to the ocean floor for resources and subsea cables, to space where low-Earth orbit satellites drive communications, and into the ill-defined domain of cyberspace.

## Who Sits at the Pivot to the New Geography?

As the 21st century dawned, Europe's centrality to the world system was already beginning to fade, despite the economic heft of the European Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union left a weakened Russia and several newly independent or restored states, significantly reducing the chances for major conflict in Europe and curtailing fear of a Eurasian heartland power. China stood on the verge of a massive economic boom, having recovered from the global strictures following the Tiananmen Square incident. Trans-Pacific trade had already overtaken trans-Atlantic trade several decades earlier, and the U.S. "victory" in the Cold War left the United States an apparently unchallengeable global hegemon.

The Sept. 11 attacks in 2001, the global financial crisis in 2007-2008 and the current COVID-19 pandemic have all blunted that sense of American invincibility. But it can still be argued that the United States has emerged as the pivot of the world system for this new century — the crossroad between Europe and Asia, between the Atlantic and Pacific. The United States, while managing social and political instability at home, remains the largest single economic or military power on the planet. And despite laments to the contrary, there is still a robust innovative culture and even a manufacturing base.

Across the Pacific, China is proffering itself as the heart of 21st-century geography. Its Belt and Road Initiative connects a massive pool of resources, human capital and consumer markets in Europe, Africa and Asia by land and sea. Its trade and transit arms reach across the Arctic, Pacific and Indian oceans, and spiderweb across Asia and Europe. China's centralized government and economic model, emerging military might and massive population position it as the peer competitor to the United States. Increased economic and military power brings with it political sway, and China is actively seeking to reshape global norms and regulations to better fit its geopolitical perspective and interests.

## Competition, But Not a Cold War

China and the United States are in a contest for the central role in an international system, in a world where, despite resurgent economic nationalism, true decoupling will be difficult, if not impossible. The Cold War splitting of the world into blocs was facilitated by a unique moment in history — the emergence of an existential rivalry at a time when the international system itself lay in rubble following decades of war across Europe and Asia. In excluding the Soviet Union and its allies from the new economic system, the United States was not necessarily decoupling with Russia, but was merely omitting it from a new financial architecture.

There is no such crisis to facilitate an easy breaking of economic bonds with China. While the United States has grown accustomed to using sanctions as an economic tool of political coercion, it has mostly been against much smaller and often marginalized nations — and success of this sanctions-heavy strategy has been mixed at best. China and the United States have complex and tightly integrated economies, from $650 billion in annual trade to reciprocal portfolio holdings and investments, sourcing of materials, and parts and labor in supply chains. It is not simply a few threads to cut, it is a complex tapestry that resists rending.

Unlike the calamity of World War II, the international system is only fraying at the edges now, not completely unraveling, despite the economic and pandemic crises of the last two decades. The United States and its partners may cut some strands with China, focused mainly on high-end technology over national security concerns, but it would take decades of concerted effort and economic pain to tease apart the bulk of trade ties. Supply chains will be reformulated, technological competition will begin to fragment cyberspace, and competition for critical raw materials will increase, but there is little room for the complete decoupling of major economies, despite current U.S.-Chinese frictions or fears of a no-deal British exit from the European Union.

## Shifting Geographic Perceptions

In noting that each century has its own geographic perspective, British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder made an important observation in his book, Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction, published in 1919: While geography may not change much over time, the way people perceive and interact with it does. Technology, economic structures, and evolving social and ideological concepts all play a major role in our interaction with the physical world. The shift from wind to coal to oil had a major impact on not only the perception of distance, but the relative

importance of certain geographical locations and routes. As we work to define the 21st-century geography, it is useful to look at the past, recognizing that it is the human interaction that provides perspective and defines the significance of geography at any given time.

Writing at the close of World War I, Mackinder defined the geography of the newly dawned 20th century as one centered on the "Heartland" of Eurasia, and on a contest of power between that continental heartland and the insular maritime powers around its periphery. Mackinder argued that technological innovation, particularly rail, would allow a heartland power to tie together the resources and population of what he termed the World Island (Europe, Asia and Africa). With its internal lines of communication protected from seapower, the heartland would then rally its resources to outproduce and outcompete the maritime powers. The ambitions of Germany and the Axis powers in World War II, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, both seemed to confirm Mackinder's assessment and thus defined the geopolitical contours of the 20th century.

The defining geographic characteristic of the 19th century was the impact of the industrial revolution on socio-economic patterns and international trade, with a surge in urbanization, the specialization of production and expanding supply lines for raw materials and markets. But the groundwork for the global cataclysms of the 21st century was also being set in motion. Continental-maritime rivalries between the United Kingdom and Russia played out in the Great Game, and global exploration filled in much of the remaining empty space on maps, leaving little buffer space between nations. As the century drew to a close, early signs of a future challenge to Europe's centrality were appearing. The United States shifted radically from a continentalist to an internationalist position, highlighted in the 1898 Spanish-American War, and Japan overturned the old continental order, supplanting a waning China as the central power in Asia.

We could walk back further, seeing the massive surge in trans-Atlantic trade in the 18th century as defining a new center to an emerging world system, with vast Atlantic replacing the closed Mediterranean as the central connector. What preceded was the 17th century, defined by the Peace of Westphalia treaties and the emergence of the modern state, with sovereignty over people, economics and territory. And before that was the 16th century, which saw the emergence of the interconnected world writ large — made manifest not so much in European conquest, as perhaps in the massive Japanese invasion force trying to push through Korea at the end of the century, armed with European arquebuses in an attempt to overturn a Chinese world order.

## Influences on 21st-Century Geography

The United States and China will sit at the forefront of the 21st-century geography, with the United States remaining a traditional maritime power, as China works to bridge a continental and maritime role. Europe and Russia will both retain power and influence, though to a lesser degree, and while they may lean toward the larger poles, they will not fall into locked alliances. Russia may align with China, but Chinese initiatives in the Arctic, Central Asia and into the Indian Ocean and Middle East are all encroaching on areas of traditional Russian interests. While Europe and the United States may align on many issues, Europe is also increasingly integrated into transcontinental land-based trade routes and at odds with the United States on regulatory fronts, from taxation to cyberspace to environmental regulations.

The formative technologies of the 21st century will also include another shift in energy, leaving some areas less important, and others emerging as the center of resource competition, including on the seafloor and potentially in space. Localized power

production, whether through wind and solar or through nuclear microreactors, will open opportunities in disconnected areas, from the Arctic to the highlands of Indochina. Agricultural sciences will further change the relationship between populations and land, adapting to changing climatic patterns and urbanization trends. Biomedical technologies will mitigate some of the demographic challenges of aging populations, overturning traditional economic models that preference the continued enlargement of labor pools. Space will become the new battleground for competing routes of information flow, and competition will extend into the physical infrastructure and the ethereal concepts of cyberspace. Hypersonics will further decimate the impact of distance, and the expansion of autonomous weapon systems will again alter the geography of war.

This emerging geographical perspective of the 21st century is still slightly out of focus. But what is certain is that it will revolve around China and the United States, locked in competition for that pivotal position in the world system. ☐

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# The U.S.'s Eurasia Obsession, Part 1: Setting the Stage

**"Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor or caprice?"**

*U.S. President George Washington, Farewell Address (1796)*

Since its founding, the United States has feared European involvement in North America and the Western Hemisphere. And from this fear arose a continentalist strategic view and an idea of a fortress America secure behind its oceanic moats, loathe to get dragged into internecine European conflicts. Over time, as the United States consolidated its position across North America, a competing concern also arose — one that began to see Eurasia at the heart of a strategic challenge to U.S. security, and promoted a more internationalist and interventionist policy abroad. These two strands continue to shape U.S. strategic assessments today amid the emerging geography of the 21st century.

## The Continentalist Compulsion

The United States first emerged as a loose federation of colonies sitting at the edge of North America, a less important frontier in the sprawling global British Empire. The establishment of the republic did not remove the British from North America, nor did it free the new nation from European rivalries, which continued to play out across North America and the Caribbean. The United States focused its attention on strengthening the union following the Revolutionary War, and protecting the nascent nation from falling prey to European powers.

It was in this context that President George Washington delivered his 1796 farewell address, advising against European entanglements. "Our detached and distant situation invites and enables

us to pursue a different course," Washington noted, highlighting the perceived protection of distance. With so much work to do on North America, from ensuring already notable sectionalism didn't tear apart the new nation to protecting the territory from rival European empires, there was little value and much risk in growing too close to any single European power, or getting drawn into European competition. Then, as is still the case today, any U.S. military action in Eurasia would see the United States vastly outnumbered, at the far ends of vulnerable supply lines, and drawing massively on the nation's economic and human resources. Entanglement and intervention simply made no sense, even if there were ideological sympathies to French philosophy and British commerce.

Throughout the 19th century, the United States maintained a largely continentalist focus, spreading its boundaries westward through settlement and colonization on land that was either bought, annexed or seized by force. This included the Louisiana and Florida purchases before 1820, followed by Alaska in 1867; the annexation of Texas in 1845 to secure the southwest border, followed by Hawaii in 1898 to secure the Pacific approaches; and the Indian Wars, the War of 1812 (which resulted in a status quo on the northern border) and the Mexican-American War (which culminated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo). Each of these historical moments was about pushing the frontiers of the United States, countering or ousting European powers (Britain, France, Spain and Russia) or the native American nations, and securing a strong and protected homeland. Sectionalism and the Civil War nearly ended the American experiment, but reinforced the core of the nation's jealous regard for territorial integrity.

The boldest expression of continentalism came in 1823. Europe was once again embroiled in internal warfare, Russia was moving down the west coast of North America, and France and Spain appeared ready to reassert their empires in the Caribbean. In his December address to Congress, President James Monroe reiterated America's non-interference in Europe and existing European colonies, but also declared that "we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety." This sentiment, later deemed the Monroe Doctrine, was not mere hubris. The Gulf of Mexico was critical for U.S. commerce traveling down the Mississippi, and the Florida Strait granted access to the Atlantic. A reassertion of European power in the Caribbean islands was a direct threat to American trade. While clearly a reflection of aspiration more than capability, the Monroe Doctrine asserted a fundamental U.S interest not only in keeping Europeans out of any future expansion in North America, but out of the hemisphere as a whole.

Continentalism never meant isolationism, and the 1800s saw the groundwork for a future internationalist United States. While avoiding involvement in European conflict, the United States tested its naval capacity in the Barbary Wars in North Africa early in the Century, signed a Treaty of Friendship with Hawaii in 1849 warning against any European annexation of the islands, sent Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan in the 1850s to open the country to trade, and briefly invaded Korea in 1871. The Civil War and reconstruction, however, kept the United States focused inward for much of the latter half of the century, aside from its distant engagements in Asia.

## The Internationalist Imperative

The radical break from continentalism came with the Spanish-American War in 1898, during which the United States annexed Hawaii. At the conclusion of the conflict, the United States also gained possession of Puerto Rico, as well as distant Guam and the Philippines. In 1890, less than a decade before the war, U.S. historian and naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan published his book, The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, in which he laments the deteriorating state of the U.S. Navy and merchant

marine after the Civil War, highlighting the connection between naval strength and economic strength seen in the history of the United Kingdom. Mahan's ideas shifted the concepts of national defense from coastal to oceanic, and the need for the United States to project power to secure its own interests, not merely play a defensive game at home.

Between Mahan's strategic geopolitics and the suddenly expanded territory, the United States embarked on a brief but notable moment of internationalism — sending the Great White Fleet of U.S. Navy battleships on a 14-month circumnavigation of the globe, backing Panamanian secession from Colombia and signing rights to the canal zone, and challenging European imperial trading and economic dominance by asserting its Open Door policy in Asia. This internationalist surge was followed by another turn inward, and as war broke out in Europe, the United States sought to maintain a neutral role and avoid entanglement.

But the Atlantic proved little protection for the United States, and its shipping fell prey to Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare. This, coupled with the publication of the Zimmermann Telegram, which appeared to threaten to bring war directly to North America, prompted the United States to declare war on Germany and send troops to Europe, marking a clear break from Washington's admonition more than a century earlier. Despite President Woodrow Wilson's involvement in the formation of the League of Nations following World War I, the United States resumed its continentalist focus. And one could even argue that U.S. intervention in the war was driven more by a desire to re-secure the Atlantic moat and reassert the Monroe Doctrine, rather than a desire to shape the balance of power in Europe.

It was following World War I that the framework for true U.S. internationalism was laid. In 1919, British Geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder published his book, Democratic Ideals and Reality, laying out his "Heartland" thesis. In what could be read as a counterpoint to Mahan's maritime focus, Mackinder warned that given the pace of modern transportation and warfighting technology, if a single power like Germany (and later Russia) could dominate the Eurasian heartland, it would have the full resources and human capital of Europe, Asia and Africa at its disposal. Its core would be protected from global maritime power, and its industrial capacity would allow it to ultimately build a fleet capable of dominating the global oceans. The key to preventing an authoritarian power from overwhelming the wartime trading democracies, Mackinder argued, was ensuring no great power could emerge in the European heartland.

Mackinder's book did not initially elicit strong attention, but by the dawning of World War II, it was enjoying a resurgence of recognition in the United States. U.S. attempts to remain out of the war in Europe and remain neutral in fortress America were once again proving less than ideal. And Mackinder offered a way to see the bigger strategic picture, to use geography, history, and a study of societies to explain why the United States could not sit on the sidelines and hope for the best.

Mackinder expounded on his ideas in a 1943 article in Foreign Affairs, and cautioned that Germany was not the only heartland power that could challenge global democracies:

> "All things considered, the conclusion is unavoidable 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."

Mackinder's concepts clearly influenced American policy in the post-World War II period. And the contrast between continentalism and internation-

alism remains a deep-seated aspect of American strategic thought, reflecting the dual continental and maritime nature of the United States. Finding the right balance within this dichotomy will be the strategic challenge of the decade, as the U.S. government grapples with the emergence of China as a new Eurasian strategic power. ☐

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# The U.S.'s Eurasia Obsession, Part 2: The China Challenge

**"The threat of an encirclement of the United States by a European-Asiatic combination, which first emerged at the time of President Monroe, reappeared at the time of the First World War, and lay dormant in the British-Japanese Alliance, has again appeared, but on a scale undreamt of in former times."**

*Nicholas J. Spykman, America's Strategy in World Politics (1942)*

The United States is in the midst of a strategic refocus from counterterrorism and rogue nation control, to so-called great power competition. While Russia, the Cold War counterpart, remains a concern, China has emerged as the primary near-peer threat. This is reawakening a key element that has long shaped U.S. foreign policy and strategic assessment — the major power of the Eurasian continent. But U.S. culture is split over the best way to deal with a Eurasian competitor, and domestic political and economic divisions will make it difficult for the United States to maintain a consistent strategy.

## The New Eurasia Challenge

In his 1942 book, America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power, the U.S. social scientist Nicholas J. Spykmam made a very clear case of why an isolationist continentalist United States was not secure in the modern world. Spykman also identified a rimland, stretching around the periphery of Eurasia, where land meets sea, and where the maritime powers contend with the great continental power. It was Spykman's elucidation that helped shape the strategic thinking behind the later U.S. Cold War policy of containment, and the need for U.S. intervention around the Eurasian periphery. The Korean and Vietnam wars were both fought in the rimland, as were the U.S. relationships with Pakistan, Persia and Europe. Current U.S. overseas

basing, and a very activist U.S. military, are all legacies of the internationalist concepts laid down by the likes of Spykman.

The United States now faces a new type of Eurasian competitor in China, one that is both continental and maritime. China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to link the resources, markets and productive capacity of Mackinder's World Island (Asia, Europe and Africa), with Beijing at the center. China is also reaching out beyond Eurasia, across the Arctic, Pacific and Atlantic, to tap into the Americas. Should China prove successful, it would represent Spykman's encircling power, one that could exert influence and force across the Atlantic and Pacific frontiers, and perhaps even along the opening Arctic front.

Though China is not poised to take over Eurasia and strangle U.S. trade along each coast any time soon, if at all, strategic thought looks to future potential capabilities, not current capacity or intent. And that raises again the core strategic dichotomy between continentalism and internationalism. While there is general agreement across the political aisle that China is a strategic competitor, if not the chief near-peer power challenger to the United States, there is little consensus on the strategy to deal with that challenge.

Even inside the current administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, there are contradictory strategic policies. There is a drive to reduce the U.S. military footprint abroad, to withdraw troops, shrink overseas basing and, in some ways, try to pull back into fortress America. And at the same time, there is a drive to declare an ideological battle with China, to enhance U.S. forces abroad, particularly in the rimland around China, to keep the confrontation with China on and around the Eurasian landmass, and to disrupt China's economic and political expansion.

## The Struggle for Balance

Such a dichotomy is not unique to the Trump administration — U.S. policy is often pulled by the competing forces of continentalism and internationalism, and similar swings were seen during the Cold War. Nor is it merely the cognitive dissonance of the foreign policy elite in Washington. There is widespread general public support for withdrawing U.S. forces after nearly two decades of overseas conflict, as well as rising U.S. recognition of China as an opposing power to U.S. interests abroad. Partisan politics can play into this seemingly contradictory viewpoint, but it isn't the root cause. America's general prosperity and isolation strengthens the sense of continentalism, particularly when it faces economic hardship. But the undercurrent of American exceptionalism, whether couched in terms of democracy, morality or modern individual rights, reinforces the internationalist bent.

The question facing the United States over the next decade or more is not just what to do about China, but how to do it. The United States remains a potent military and economic power, but it is also facing significant social and economic challenges that will reinforce the need to strengthen the homeland before seeking change abroad. The COVID-19 crisis, strong social divisions and extreme partisanship will compel the U.S. government to look inward, as well as U.S. citizens to urge more spending at home rather than on foreign military action.

At the same time, despite recent calls for reshaping supply chains and "decoupling" with China, the United States cannot simply withdraw into a shell and hope that things in the Eastern Hemisphere have no impact at home. Even in its most continentalist moments in the past, the United States has not been truly isolationist, nor has it been able to tease itself away from global commerce, both to absorb

U.S. surplus (today in services more than manufactures), or to bring in critical raw materials. Even if the United States decides to take a more limited role abroad, it will not be immune to shifting geopolitical patterns that would impact resources and market access. As Mackinder noted and Spykman reiterated, the world is a closed system, and events in one place now ripple around the globe, whether we want them to or not.

Both internationalism and continentalism have their costs and rewards, but it is hard to effectively straddle the line. An internationalist strategy requires active combined political, economic and military influence around the Eurasian periphery, ideally in close cooperation with partners and allies. Attempting to be only partially internationalist quickly sees the strategy lose focus, sees allies lose trust, and paves the way for the Eurasian competitor to exploit the attendant fractures. A purely continentalist strategy that seeks to strengthen the homeland and maintain trade through professed neutrality, but does little to intervene to shape developments in Eurasia, can last only a brief amount of time before the shifting global power balance begins to impinge on America's sense of security, triggering a return to an internationalist course. ☐

Mark Schiefelbein—Pool/Getty Images

## China's Amphibian Dilemma: AaStraddling Land and Sea Ambitions

**"Land-based northerners have dominated Chinese culture throughout most of her history and whenever they have been in political control... China has been oriented primarily inwardly.... On the other hand, when control was exercised by South China groups... a strong maritime outlook was emphasized. ... In the former instances, China functioned as a continental rimland state, in the latter as a maritime rimland state."**

*Donald W. Meinig, Heartland and Rimland in Eurasian History (1956)*

China borders the largest number of countries by land, and its navy now boasts the largest number of battle force ships by sea. With the pressures and opportunities of both a continental and maritime power, China faces an amphibian's dilemma, as the characteristics best suited for life at sea and life at land may not always prove complementary. Traditional continental powers are more prone to autocratic leadership to manage their challenges, while traditional maritime powers lean toward democratic systems and more open markets. China's attempt to straddle both can intensify sectionalism and exacerbate differences between the interior core that remains continental in outlook, and the coastal areas that become more maritime in outlook.

This challenge is also highlighted in China's attempts to reshape global norms and standards, which themselves largely represent the maritime world order. The apparent global political and economic dissonance is not merely caused by China seeking change, but by the very continental nature of China's history. China is bringing a continental mindset to a maritime system. And though it is able to rally sympathy with others with a more continental history, China may find it difficult to bridge the continental/maritime divide.

## China as a Continental Power

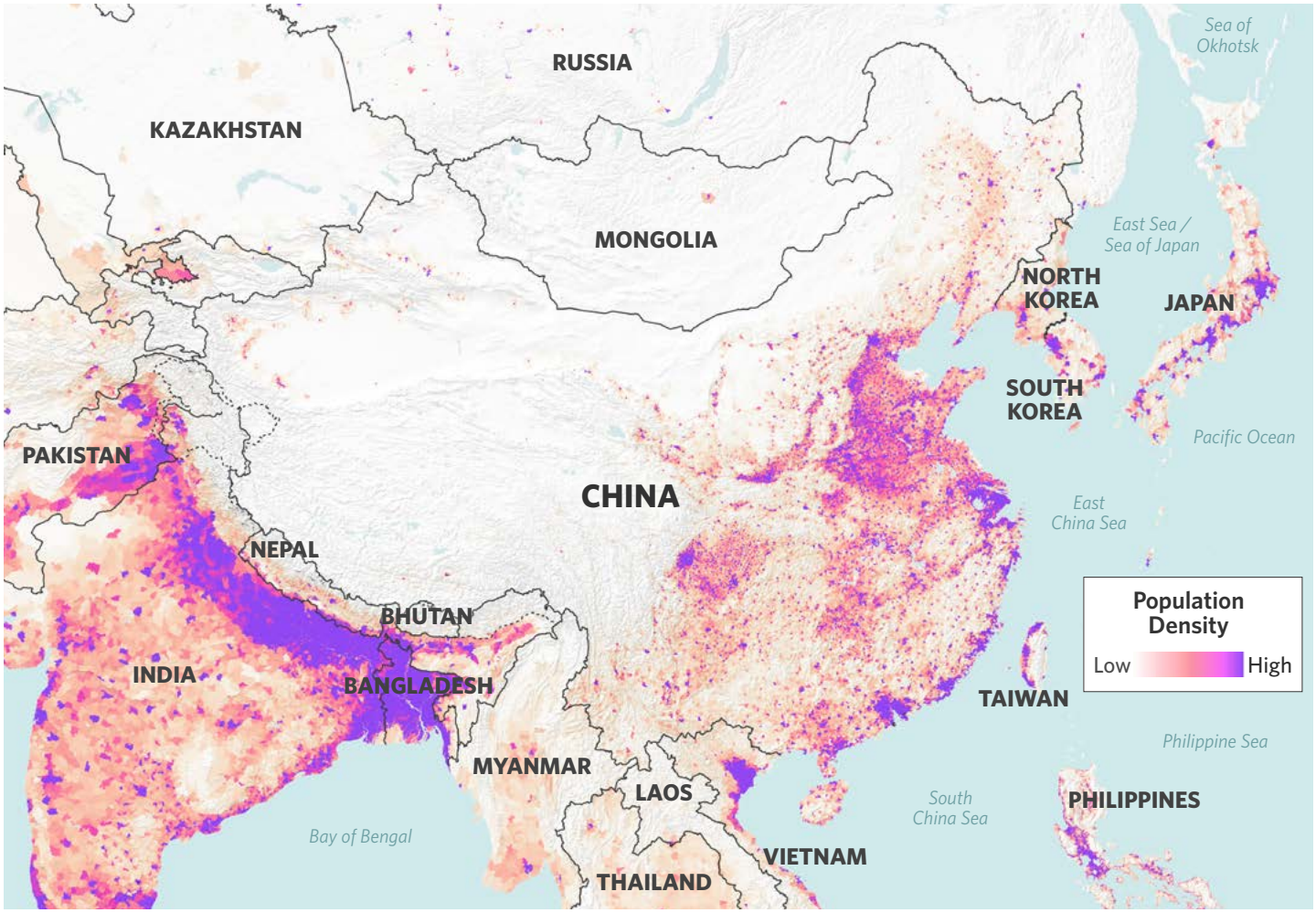
For most of its history, China has been a classic continental power. Initially a sedentary agricultural society on the northern plain along the Yellow River, China faced threats from both nomadic tribes to the north and west, as well as seafaring raiders along the east and southern coasts. Successive Chinese dynasties fought externally to secure buffer states and protect against outside powers, as well as internally to consolidate the fractious ethnic Han core, which stretched south to the Yangtze River and the rich rice land's beyond.

Chinese empires followed a general pattern of dynastic rise and collapse:

- Consolidation of the Han core under a strong central leadership.
- Pressing outward along the periphery to counter external threats or capture new opportunities.
- Expanding the bureaucracy to manage the sprawling empire.
- Internal and external economic, political and military pressures weaken the center of power.
- Some shock that finally breaks the back of a waning empire, starting over the cycle.

China's reconsolidation came under external northern powers twice: the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols

## Population Density in China and the Surrounding Region

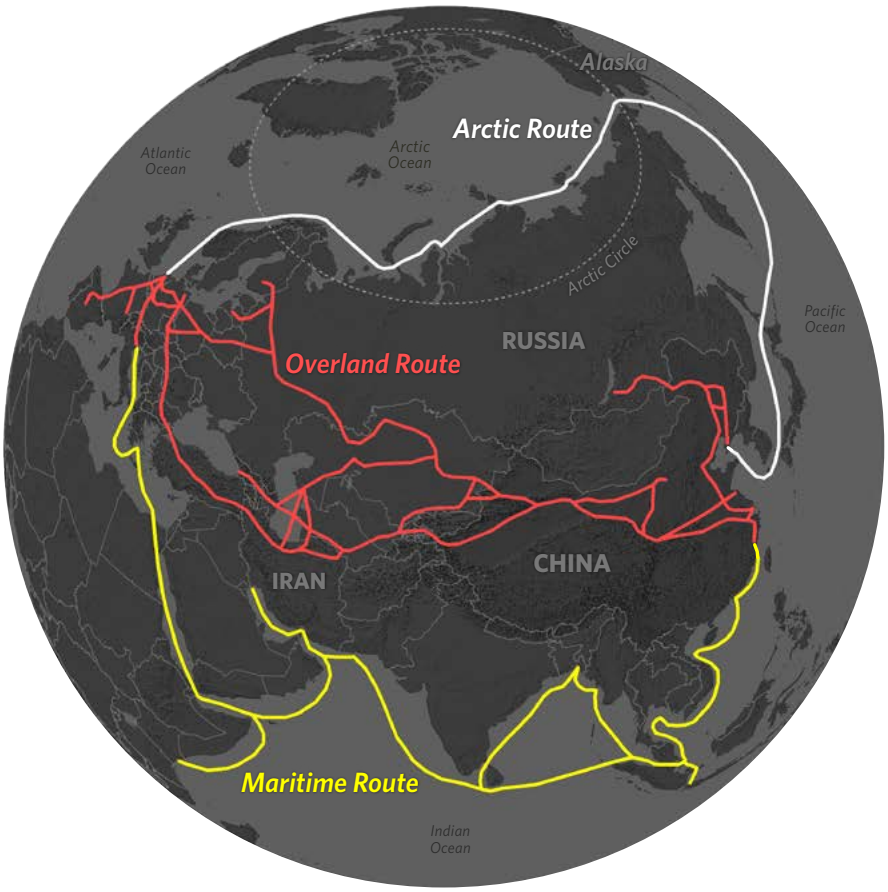



Data: CIESIN GPWv4

(1279-1368) and the Qing dynasty of the Manchu (1644-1912). During the Tang dynasty (618-906), China took its position as the "Middle Kingdom," establishing suzerainty relationships with numerous nations around its expanding periphery, and engaging in international trade and diplomatic delegations across the Asian continent. But while trade and international connections expanded, China remained heavily focused on the continent, not at sea. Managing the myriad differing population and linguistic groups inside China and pressure from external threats shaped priorities, and trade outside of the expanded empire and bordering states was largely unnecessary.

China has flirted with a maritime focus in the past, often when power was centered in the south. The Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) had a large navy for coastal defense and riverine operations. And when the Mongols conquered Korea and Southern Song, they turned that maritime power briefly against Japan, with two ultimately unsuccessful invasions. During the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644), where the capital was initially in southern China at Nanjing, Zheng He embarked on several voyages around Asia and Africa in his famed treasure fleets. While these marked a notable expansion of Chinese maritime activity, they were largely focused on asserting Chinese power and centrality through diplomatic and tribute collection delegations, rather than building trade routes or a long-term naval presence. And with the capital shifted back north to Beijing and internal troubles once again arising, China disposed of the fleet and turned continental once again.

## China's Belt and Road Initiative




Data: China's National Development and Reform Commission

Modern China has largely retained that continental focus. Like earlier peasant rebellions, the Chinese Communist revolution took root in the interior in the 1930s and 40s, despite the nationalist government having a maritime outlook from its southern base in Nanjing. And while Taiwan has always been a focus of the Communist Party's unification of China, early consolidation focused on western regions, securing Xinjiang in 1950 and Tibet in 1951. Mao Zedong (1949-1976) focused heavily on China's interior, at times with disastrous results, as in the Great Leap Forward. Even as Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989) moved to shift China's economic policies and open the country to more trade, the Chinese government prioritized managing internal ethnic and social issues, as well as China's numerous disputes along its land borders. During this time, China's national security was focused on maintaining a large, land-based People's Liberation Army (PLA), with infrequent attention to naval power.

China today is still largely a continental land power. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China found itself with 14 contiguous neighbors, many ambivalent toward the People's Republic. Domestically, around two-thirds of the Chinese population live in the interior, though much of the nation's economic activity occurs along the coast. This dichotomy has the potential to stir traditional instability, and Chinese leaders spend a lot of their time and effort emphasizing the importance of the interior. The response to the global financial crisis was to rapidly increase infrastructure spending in the interior, and enhance rail connectivity toward western China. The Belt and Road initiative (BRI) continued that continentalist strategy by seeking to redirect attention from domestic socio-economic gaps to economic opportunities across the borders to the west and south.

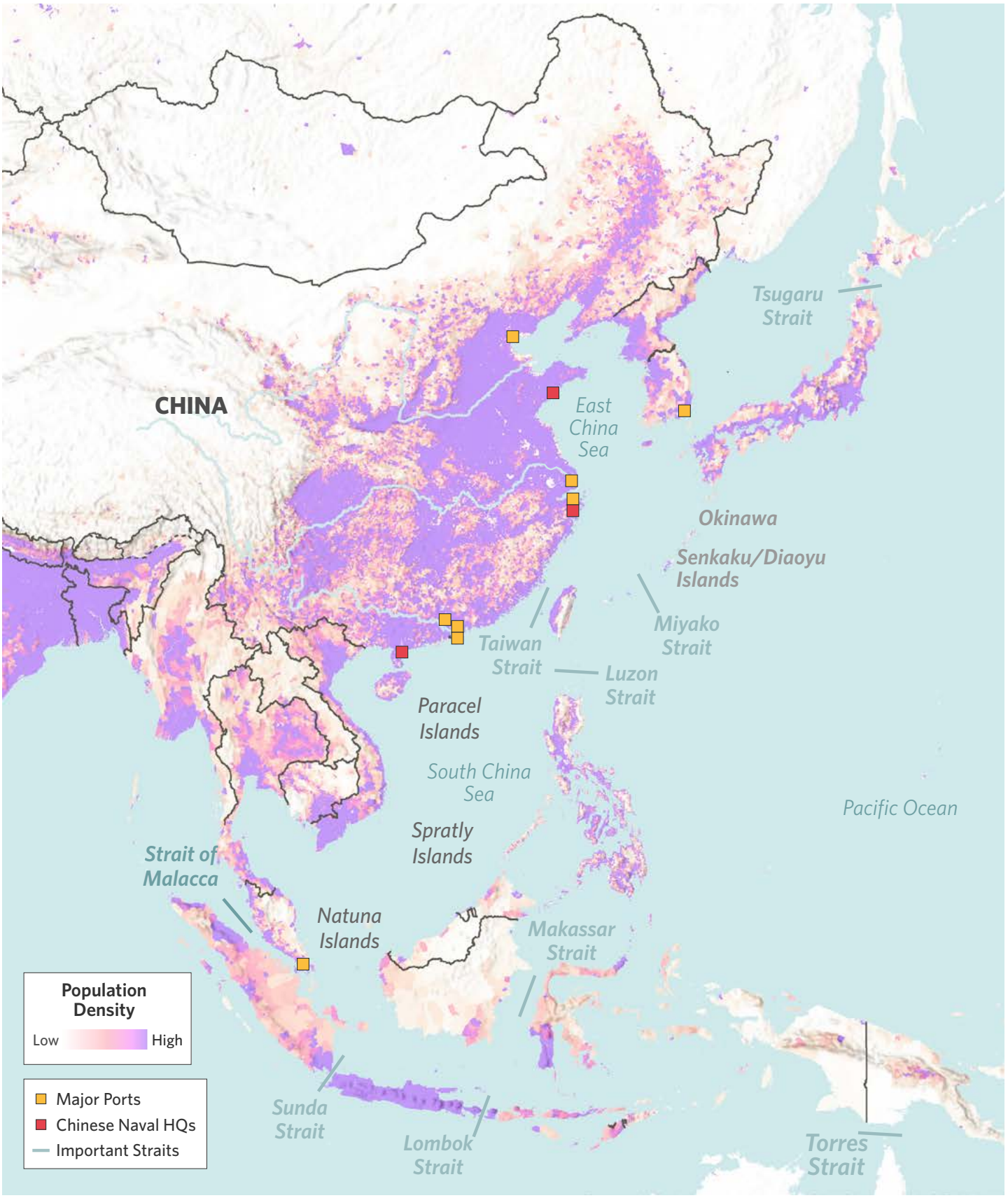
## China as a Maritime Power

China's rapid economic rise from the mid-1990s created a new pressure point on the Chinese system. For much of China's history, the country was largely self-sufficient, so long as it didn't mismanage its resources. But economic growth increasingly linked China into extended supply chains, for raw materials and for overseas markets. With most outward-focused economic activity taking place along the coast or along rivers connected to the coast, China's international trade was largely by sea, and vulnerable to the key maritime chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca. Rising competition with the United States reinforced China's trade risk, with U.S. allies or partners forming a crescent surrounding the Chinese coast, from South Korea and Japan through the Philippines and down through Southeast Asia and Australia.

For China, there were three options: 1) Accept U.S. control of the seas, as most other nations did; 2) Find alternative routes to reduce its vulnerability to the chokepoints along its maritime frontier, or 3) Build a naval capability that could secure its supply chains throughout the region and beyond. China chose the latter two, one through the BRI and the other via the rapid expansion of the PLA navy, coupled with air and sea defense missiles and territorial assertions in the South China Sea. By the late 1990s, China was building bases and airstrips on contested reefs and rocks in the South China Sea. And in early 2001, tensions rose amid the Hainan Island Incident. While China backed off at the time, due both to its own recognized weaknesses and the U.S. shift in attention to the war against terrorism, Beijing redoubled its shipbuilding efforts.

China's navy now outmatches the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and has more battle force ships than the United States (though in tonnage, the U.S. Navy's vessels still far outweigh those of the PLA Navy). Combined, these developments have reshaped the balance of naval power in the Western Pacific. In addition, China has significantly expanded its coast guard and other coastal defense forces, revived and expanded several airfields and small bases on artificial islands built on disputed reefs in the South China Sea, and has fielded two aircraft

# Strategic Constraints in China's Maritime Frontier




Data: NASA SEDAC, CIESIN GPWv4

carriers, with another under construction and several more planned.

While China's naval buildup focused initially on quantity, it has shifted in recent years to quality, testing numerous versions of ships before choosing preferred platforms, and coming close to its peer competitors in several areas of key naval technologies. China has tested its ability to operate for extended periods of time far from home, taking advantage of anti-piracy operations off the coast of Africa to provide real-world training for its crews and establishing a base in Djibouti. The PLA navy does remain behind in some aspects, including anti-submarine warfare and multi-domain naval operations. It also has no culture of carrier battle group operations, and has not been tested in real combat experience since the 1970s. But Beijing has gone a long way to build a modern and professional navy that by many accounts can now outcompete the U.S. Navy in the enclosed waters of the South China Sea.

China continues to seek to shape the maritime environment within the so-called first island chain, and has regularly pushed beyond into the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific and more recently into the Arctic, though the latter still primarily with its civilian fleet. China's future shipbuilding capacity appears robust, while that of Japan and the United States is curtailed by budgetary concerns and shifting priorities.

## China as an Amphibian Power

China's naval build-up has been rapid, facilitated by the centralized nature of the government and economy. And this maritime focus has paralleled China's landward infrastructure and trade push along its periphery, reflecting both China's overall economic strength and its stated intent to take its place among the chief powers of the world system. But as with past rising powers and empires, China faces challenges both from the status quo power, the United States, and from its many neighbors. China's proclaimed pursuit of "win-win" solutions as it expands its economic, political and military influence will only serve it for so long before the attendant imbalances in power lead to resistance — and in many places, that is already happening.

China's dual challenges with managing its continental interests and its newer maritime priorities have historical precedence in other rising powers. In his 1890 book, The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, American naval scholar and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan discusses how France consistently struggled with the economic and security costs of seeking to dominate the European continent and maintain a robust navy to counter British maritime power.

At the time, Mahan sought to stir the United States to a global maritime role, expounding on the way British sea power shaped national strength. Germany, in both World Wars, also found itself torn between its continental and maritime priorities. Both were important to secure German power, but each also required a unique strategy with very different resources and key geographies. During the Cold War, the United States used the geographically constrained Soviet sea access to hem in the country, while also exploiting its long land borders in the strategy of containment.

Similarly, for China, neighboring countries represent both an opportunity for economic and strategic gain, and a vulnerability to China's national security. Beijing must ensure that its borders remain secure, that regional problems in places like Afghanistan do not interfere with Chinese supply lines through Central and South Asia or spill over into western China, and find ways to reduce the options for the United States to solidify allies and partners around the Chinese periphery. China must also do this at sea to secure its dominant position in the enclosed seas of Asia, as well as regional territorial competitions and undermine U.S. maritime coalitions, while also building out a network of port and resupply agreements along the length of its supply lines.

The U.S. emergence as a global naval power in the 20th Century occurred only after the United States had largely secured its continental position, and was left with only two land neighbors. China's maritime emergence is happening while it is still seeking to secure its continental position through infrastructure and trade, but this is still a work in progress. Yet if it could, through a combination of economic, political and security arrangements, China would represent the new heartland power envisioned by British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder. As early as his 1904 paper defining the Heartland, Mackinder noted that China could at some future point fill this role as a nation capable of uniting the resource base and manpower of Europe, Asia and Africa and then turning its focus to the seas, where it would overwhelm the international maritime order. In his 1944 book titled The Geography of the Peace, American strategist Nicholas Spykman also noted that the "dominant power in the Far East will undoubtedly be China, providing she achieves real unification and provided that Japan's military power is completely destroyed."

## Making the Leap

Continental powers must deal with managing governance over large territories, balance the differing interests of numerous neighbors, ensure unity among a diversity of domestic ethnic regions, and shoulder the higher cost of less efficient transport across land. Maritime powers are driven by commerce and the need to both ensure the continuity of long supply lines far from the core national support base, as well as engage in international intercourse that highlights differing social and economic norms from a continental power. But an amphibious nation must manage both the complexities of a continental empire and the challenges of a maritime power.

A key question, then, for understanding the geography of the 21st century is whether China will be able to overcome the amphibian's dilemma, and emerge as equally formidable both on land and at sea. ☐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## Russia's Emerging Arctic Maritime Frontier

**"Because of the inadequacy of the Arctic Coast as an outlet to the ocean, the great heartland can find access to the sea only by routes that cross the encircling mountain barrier and the border zone beyond."**

*Nicholas J. Spykman, America's Strategy in World Politics (1942)*

Russia's surge of Arctic activity reflects the economic significance of the region and the impact of shifting climate patterns that now offer the prospect of an extended Russia maritime frontier. Russia has rebuilt and expanded its Cold War-era security architecture along its Arctic frontier, significantly increased natural gas production from its operations on the Yamal Peninsula, and laid out a 15-year plan to improve land-, air- and sea-based infrastructure connecting the Northern Sea Route to northern Russia and farther south. The thawing Russian coastline is both a strategic opportunity and challenge, one that may fundamentally reshape Russia's relations with its European and Asian neighbors, and with the United States.

### Enclosed Geography

One of the core tenets of geopolitics is the significance of geography in setting the stage for foreign and domestic policy. As American geopolitician Nicholas Spykman noted in his 1942 America's Strategy in World Politics, "Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent." Geography's importance is often altered by technology, from canals and railroads to new critical minerals or changing energy sources. But rarely does geography itself change enough to alter the constraints and compulsions on states, at least not in a short time frame or outside localized events or disasters. The warming of the Arctic, however, is changing the core realities of Russia's geography, and it is happening at a pace that allows and compels a Russian response.


A key characteristic of geography that has shaped Russia over the centuries has been its lack of riverine connectivity. Unlike Europe or the United States, Russia's rivers rarely served to link agricultural zones and population centers, or connect the interior to the coasts. Rather, the major river drainage systems empty into the landlocked Caspian; into the constrained Black and Baltic seas; and most of all, into the iced-over Arctic Ocean. This constraint also offered a measure of security: Russia historically has proven incredibly resilient to invasion, particularly by sea. This river drainage system was one of the primary characteristics of Russia that led British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder initially to identify the Russian region as the geographical pivot of history, and later to identify it as the Eurasian heartland.

Russia long sought to break out of its continental heartland, pushing for sea access on the Pacific, seeking to expand its frontiers in the Baltic, and pressing south toward India and the Middle East (the latter being the subject of the so-called Great Game between Britain and Russia.) The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 made the weakness of Russia's limited maritime access manifest. Japan defeated the Russian Pacific fleet based in northern China, and it took Russia's Baltic Fleet — unable to reach East Asia via the Arctic Sea — some seven months to sail around the world only to meet defeat in the Tsushima Strait.

## Arctic Opportunities

That inaccessibility is changing rapidly. Coastal navigation along the Northern Sea Route now starts


earlier in the year, lasts longer and is even reaching the point that several passages have little need for icebreakers. Moscow's response has been to increase investment in both resource extraction and infrastructure development and to rebuild its Cold-War era military positions along the Arctic coast, updating with new equipment and technology. This year, Moscow established a special security council commission on the Arctic, and Russia produced a 15-year plan for Arctic development.

Russia has some 24,000 kilometers of Arctic coastline, compared to less than 20,000 kilometers of total U.S. oceanic coastline. The Russian Arctic accounts for more than 10 percent of national GDP, some 90 percent of Russian natural gas production and is a major contributor of strategic minerals, including nickel and palladium. An early sign of the potential future value of Russian Arctic ports came in the early years of World War II, when the allies supplied Russia through Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. The rest of the Northern Sea Route, however, remained unusable, and played little role in Russia's support of anti-Japanese fighters in the Far East, nor in the final days of the war when Russia declared war on Japan.

Today's changing climate is allowing not only greater access to the Russian Arctic frontier, but more reliable transportation of key commodities out of the Arctic. Already, Russian LNG from the Arctic has shipped to as far away as India, and this year saw the first tanker shipment of Russian Arctic oil to China. Russia has plans to develop large ports at each end of the Northern Sea Route for both containers and commodities, allowing ice-class vessels to move more frequently within Arctic waters and shifting cargos to traditional vessels for the rest of the journey to Europe or Asia.

China has shown strong interest in using the Russian Arctic seaways, and has been a major funder and

consumer of Russian Arctic natural gas production. Japan and South Korea have also shown interest in the Northern Sea Route and Russian resources, and Russian and Finnish companies are cooperating on a possible undersea fiber cable through the Russian Arctic connecting Northern Europe to Japan. An opening Arctic provides opportunities for resource extraction, transportation and communications connectivity, and provides Russia with a shorter maritime route between its east and west coasts, the Northern Sea Route serving in that sense as a greatly extended Panama Canal.

## Arctic Challenges

This international interest may also prove a challenge to Russia. China is funding Russian Arctic resource extraction, but it is also carrying out its own energy exploration in Arctic waters, and is exploring ways to bypass the Northern Sea Route, or at least the requirements Russia puts on its use. China's reach into the Arctic matches a push through Central Asia and one through the Indian Ocean, all parts of the Belt and Road Initiative, and together wrapping around Russia and its traditional areas of influence, forcing an eventual Russian response. The opening Arctic seas have spurred Russia to restrengthen its Arctic defenses, but this has reawakened the United States and Europe to the strategic challenges of the same region, and seen renewed defense activity and repositioning of forces to match.

What once served as a largely impenetrable wall of ice protecting Russia's back is now an opening avenue exposing a long Russian coastline with little infrastructure and few population centers. Russia's Arctic coastline is largely empty. The government is offering incentives to increase migration to the region, to start businesses and develop infrastructure, but even with the melting sea ice, the area remains inhospitable and difficult territory. Changing permafrost patterns and poor quality construction and maintenance of Soviet-era infrastructure are adding to the cost of future development.

Most Russian Arctic development is in the west along the Kola Peninsula and at the Yamal and Gydan peninsulas, where the Ob River empties into the Kara Sea. There are also mineral developments in the Arctic areas of Krasnoyarsk Krai and The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), as well as plans for expanded port infrastructure on the Chukchi Peninsula at the eastern end of the Northern Sea Route. The nearly 2 million people in Russian Arctic territories may be the largest Arctic national population, but this is far shy of what it would take to develop a truly connected and robust region capable of sustaining a broad economic base or supplying the manpower and presence necessary to ensure security along the long opening coastline.

## What to Watch

For Russia, then, the opening Arctic provides both opportunity and risk. For much of Russia's history, the country has been oriented south, looking to spread its influence and at times its borders to warmer seas. The Arctic was a shield, even during the Cold War when the polar route was the shortest for strategic aircraft and nuclear missiles. An open Arctic coastline increases foreign activity along Russia's north, and draws increasing interest from Asian nations seeking resources and routes. Russia's FSB has already raised concerns that foreign actors are trying to use Arctic native populations in Russia to undermine Russian strategic security, and the government has established a new review of foreign investment and economic activity in the Arctic to ensure Russian national interests.

New Russian naval development will need to take regular Arctic operations into consideration, not merely through the construction of more than a dozen new icebreakers, but from the design of ships themselves. The longer coastline and increased maritime traffic require a robust observation and

communications infrastructure, linked into territorial defense and search and rescue. Russian aviation is expanding Arctic operations, from plans to add heavy drones to maintain surveillance to additional fighter aircraft, and even experiments once again as the Soviets did during the Cold War era with establishing temporary airfields on ice to ensure expanded operational capabilities. Russia is also modifying existing weapons systems and designing new ones for Arctic conditions.

Arctic infrastructure, resource extraction, transit safety and national security all require expenditure, and while the Arctic is a critical component of Russia's GDP, it does not provide the needed resources to fund the rising infrastructure and development needs. Yet for Moscow, Arctic development isn't an option, it is increasingly a necessity. The Russians may have a head start in rebuilding Arctic defense structures and in deploying and building icebreakers, but they are also dealing with a 24,000-kilometer coastline that now needs securing. In the global naval race, Russia remains far behind the United States and China. Russia's Arctic development is a new priority for Moscow, adding to its existing long land borders, its troubled relations along its former Soviet European frontier, its expanded activity in the Middle East and North Africa, and in the face of a rising China. As we look over the next decade, the shift in Russian geography will play a significant role in how Russia reassesses its international relations and its national priorities. ☐

MICHEL PORRO/Getty Images

# The Quest for European Unity: No End of History

**"In the long run, customs unions formed of naturally related states, and general security in time of peace, will prove of far more importance to the peoples of Europe than the exact position of boundary lines."**

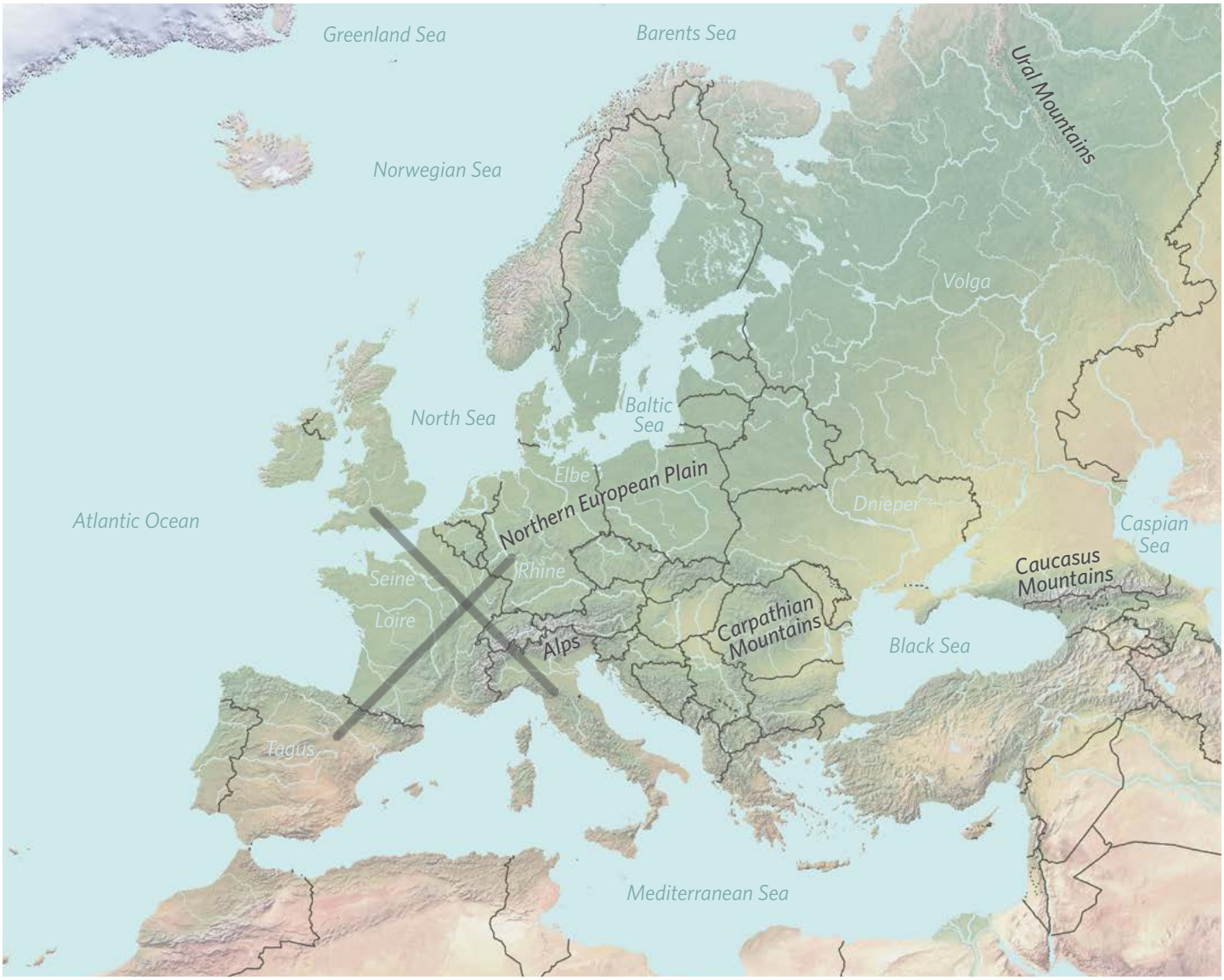
*Isaiah Bowman, The New World: Problems in Political Geography (4th ed., 1928)*

Europe faces a challenge of identity and international role over the next decade. For nearly 500 years, Europe sat at the center of the international system, its internal competitions rippling out across the globe. But the relative balance of global power and influence has shifted. And rather than being the driving force of global dynamics, Europe is increasingly caught between major powers: the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and now the United States and China. Internally, Europe still strives for the creation of a continental union, though those dreams have been eroded by financial crises, Brexit and a resurgence of nationalism in recent years. Externally, Europe remains fragmented in its foreign policy and prioritization. The shifting patterns of global competition will compel Europe to rethink its internal structures and to come to grips with defining its interests abroad. Otherwise, it will find itself drifting further from the center of history, with internal divisions once again becoming its defining characteristic.

## Overcoming European Divisions

History is not static. It meanders and flows like a river. You can see some of the curves ahead, but the precise shape, pace and turbulence is often not fully recognized until it is past. Yet for several decades, Europe has strived to end history, or at least to overcome the longstanding geographic, cultural and linguistic divisions that have so long shaped the development of the Continent. While the closing of the Cold War allowed the United States its brief "unipolar moment," it provided Europe with the op-

## Europe as a Peninsula






portunity to accelerate its plans to create unity from a traditionally fractious set of nations. The expansion of the European Union, the introduction of the Euro and the promotion of a progressive regulatory environment were all part of the same strategic and philosophical mindset: the desire to unify Europe, overcome national identities, and progress human society based on European liberal models.

The progressive drive for European unity, however, was just the latest in a long line of attempts to create a common European destiny — whether shaped by conquest and war, royal marriages and diplomacy, or economic domination. In some ways, Europe has long thought of itself as a common entity, or has at least recognized a common European heritage compared with the rest of the world. Europe could overcome its internal differences and pull together in the face of external threats, whether they be the Moors, the Ottomans or the Russians.

But more often than not, European history is rife with shifting alliances, as varying powers sought to either create a universal monarchy or dominate the Continent. Ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, combined with the competition between

rising ideas of "national liberties" and universal monarchies, created an ever-shifting pattern of key countries seeking to maintain a balance of power in Europe, or dominate the whole system. The two paths both sought a common goal — that is, some form of peace and stability that could facilitate economic growth and security.

## Internal Challenges

One of the biggest challenges Europe has faced has been defining Europe itself. From a continental perspective, Europe includes parts of Russia and Turkey. From a geographic perspective, Europe is a peninsula, squeezed at its base between the Black and Baltic seas, and reaching out toward the Atlantic. British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder, commenting on the long history of internal European dynamics at the close of World War I in 1919 , noted that the core of Europe could be seen in a cross, drawn with the intersecting axes of Spain-France-Germany and U.K.-France-Italy. This area represented the core of modern European activity and competition for power and position, but relegated Central and Eastern Europe to contested frontier zones against Ottoman Turk and Russian expansion. Britain and the United Kingdom, in its island redoubt, played a shifting role on the mainland, at times active in continental contests, while at other times shifting to an offshore naval and balancing strategy.

The origins of the European Union, in the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community in the 1950s, reflect this core of Europe, with then West Germany, France and Italy joined by Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark then joined in the 1970s, followed by Spain, Portugal and Greece in the 1980s. With the exception of Greece, Cold War-era Europe fit cleanly within Mackinder's cross. But with the end of the Cold War, the European Union launched a currency union and several rounds of expansion (politely termed "enlargement" by Brussels to avoid appearing imperialistic) — stretching the bloc into Scandinavia and then into the former Soviet frontier in the Baltic states and deep into Central and Eastern Europe. The European Union has also considered expanding its membership to Turkey and further into the Balkans.

The rapid expansion of the European Union, coupled with the drive for greater integration, created many of the challenges the bloc must face going forward. Socio-economic and political differences were already evident in the core of Europe, but expansion and the 2008 Global FInancial Crisis brought them to the fore. Other complications include finding the right balance between net contributors and net receivers of European funds, differential labor costs, internal migration and persistent differing national cultures. Politically, Europe is seeing a rise in populism and a lean toward more authoritarian governments, particularly on its eastern frontiers — reflecting old geopolitical patterns that pitted liberal democratic maritime powers against conservative, autocratic continental states.

The European Union's foundational pillars are increasingly coming under attack from within the bloc, contributing to the United Kingdom's decision to leave. Between the Global Financial Crisis and the current COVID-19 crisis, the core European countries are struggling to maintain unity in demanding fiscal responsibility among member states. Responses to the two economic crises have also awoken calls for at least limited trade barriers and protectionism. And these crises are reviving opposition to free movement of peoples within the European Union as well — not only regarding increased asylum seekers from outside the bloc, but also intra-European labor migration. An uneven economic recovery from COVID-19 will only exacerbate the growing rifts within Europe, and may force the European Union to either ease its ambitions for higher integration, or rethink the scope of the bloc itself.

## External Challenges

Europe's internal structural challenges are matched by a shifting global environment. For much of the post-Cold War period, Europe has been at the center of shaping the global regulatory environment, using the combined heft of the European single market to further a progressive agenda that ran the gamut from livestock welfare to digital privacy rights. But the comparative strength of the European market is weakening, and disagreements over regulations within the Continent are growing.

China has taken advantage of European internal divisions and limited European investment monies to accelerate Beijing's own economic (and by default political) expansion and influence into Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Greece, the Balkans and even into the core European countries. The core of Europe is only now starting to shape a more unified stance on countering Chinese investment, espionage and its human rights and territorial assertions abroad. As China grows more assertive of its own international position, its pressure against European unity, and against European ideals, is forcing the Continent to prioritize and define its counter.

Russia, too, has been able to exploit European divisions, playing on energy ties and differing internal European perceptions of the Russian "threat." Central and Eastern Europe are much more attuned to Russian actions than Western Europe, and this poses potential friction as Europe seeks to define its own internal and external security priorities. This is heightened by questions of the future role of NATO, the overall stability of U.S.-European relations (or at least the trajectory of interests), and the role for European defense forces outside of the NATO framework. As the United States continues its drawdown of forces abroad and seeks to reduce active engagement in global conflicts, the European Union will find itself pulled by varying foreign policy interests, as its member states deal with issues in either former colonial empires or along the European periphery.

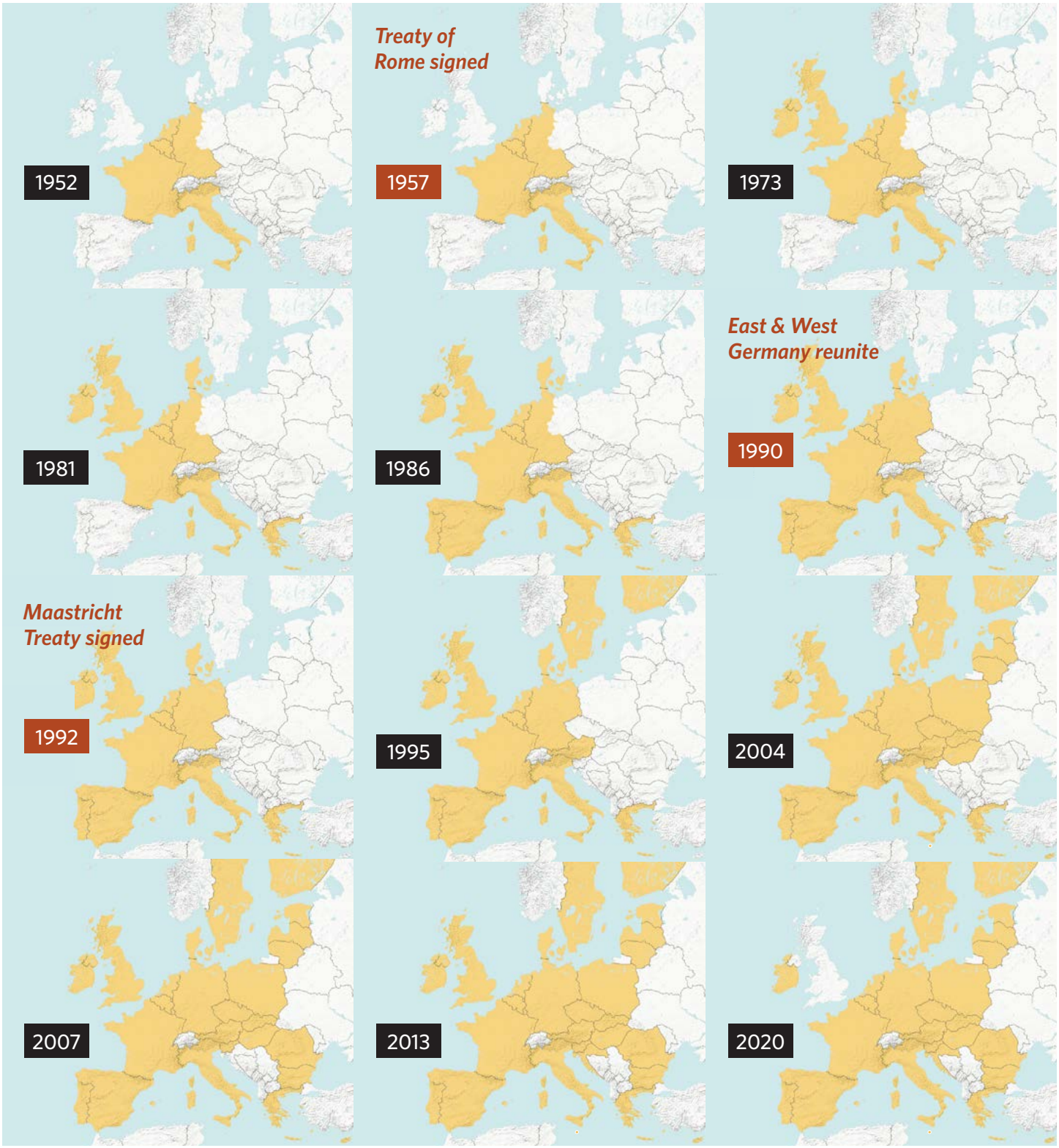
Turkey and the Balkans are also both raising new security challenges for Europe, with Chinese arms sales into Serbia, as well as rising tensions between Greece and Ankara over territorial disputes in the Mediterranean Sea. The ongoing civil conflict in Libya has drawn differing interests and involvement from core European states, and counterterrorism in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa continues to draw attention from France and others. Core European states, including France and Germany, are taking a greater interest in the South China Sea and Chinese maritime expansion, with France moving faster due to its Pacific holdings and its longstanding more independent foreign defense policies. The Arctic is also gaining attention as climate changes open the area to more economic activity and revived military competition, driving the European Union to seek more of a role in regional management. The need to define European defense priorities in the near and far abroad, and to balance European and NATO responsibilities, will further test Europe's evolution.

## Europe in the New World Order

For the European Union, the post-Cold War world has not shaped up the way it had hoped. Northwestern European liberalism appears to be reaching its limit and facing resistance around the world. Relations with the United States have wavered for several decades, as differences in strategic outlook and attention have diverged. The resurgence of Russia is forcing Europe to deal with its internal divisions. And China's rise as not only an economic and military power, but an alternative source of new global norms, clashes with the very conception of Europe as the vanguard of modern civilization and political order.

Internally, the old struggle of "liberties" versus absolutist governments has re-awoken. The expansion of the European Union has made consensus nearly impossible, and even compromise increasingly difficult. Demographic declines and lingering economic

# Development of The European Union



fallout from a series of crises is already forcing a reassessment of what it means to be European and whether borders can and will remain open within the union. And Brexit, even if troubled, may well inspire some European countries to expect more from Brussels on threat of exit. Others, meanwhile, may wonder if the bloc itself is too large to manage, and perhaps force non-conforming countries to exit, or at least promote a new tiered system of Europe as the best path to manage the future.

What is abundantly clear, however, is that despite the noble sentiment, the European Union as the great European experiment has failed to end history and replace the ideas of nation, border and differences with a common European identity as a model for the future of global cooperation. In the fourth edition of his book The New World: Problems in Political Geography released in 1928, the American geographer Isaiah Bowman envisioned a European customs union less interested in borders than in trade. But while Bowman's prognostication may have come true, so too has his caution that we "need never fear international cooperation as a leveling process" and that "the peoples of the world are too unlike, their differences are too inveterate, for leveling to take place."

The European Union is unlikely simply to collapse, but its identity crisis will force it to reconcile with both the changing global environment, and the reality of differences within the enlarged bloc itself. If the European core cannot pull together and come to a common understanding on a collaborative economic, technological and security path, Europe may find its global position sliding further, which will only embolden nations to either break free and pursue their own national path, or tighten their reliance on other great powers. ☐

Maps4media via Getty Images

# Middle Powers: Maneuvering Among Giants

**"It is only those countries having adequate resources of men and materials which can exercise a direct influence on the peaceful organization of international society."**

*Nicholas J. Spykman,*
*The Geography of the Peace (1944)*

A multipolar world system creates both greater opportunity and greater incentive for middle powers to assert their interests and seek to influence global norms and developments. Middle powers will be courted by big powers, giving them more room to maneuver. They will be critical components of any balance of power in the international system.

## The Difficulty of Defining Middle Powers

In international relations and geopolitics, the idea of middle powers is admittedly a bit fuzzy. At times, they are defined in a geographic sense, as countries caught physically between large powers — such as Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, or Korea between China and imperial Japan. At other times, they are defined in terms of economic or military strength — not as powerful as the great powers, but more powerful than their neighbors. South Africa, Egypt or Iran during the Cold War were at times important middle powers in this sense.

Middle powers may be defined by the role they play, such as serving as intermediaries between larger powers like Canada and India did during the Cold War. Or they may be countries sitting astride two worlds or civilizations, such as Turkey, which bridges Europe and the Islamic world, or Japan and Australia, one an Asian nation considered part of the West, the other a Western nation located in the Asia-Pacific region.

The flexibility of the term "middle power" also reflects the changing position of nations within an international context. The designation is often transitory, based on rising or falling economic, political or military fortunes or changing priorities of the big powers. Mainland China emerged as a middle power during the Cold War, while Venezuela's internal economic and political dynamics have seen that country lose its status as a middle power in northern South America and the Caribbean.

## Reemergence of Middle Powers

For our purposes, we will consider the middle powers those countries that do not reach the combined power and influence of the big powers, but nonetheless remain influential in their region or even beyond in select thematic areas. The reemergence of a multipolar world system opens new opportunities for middle powers, either alone or collectively, to balance competition among the big powers, and to try and shape the evolution of global norms and standards. We can already see examples today of middle powers seeking to shape their environment and refusing to lock themselves into any singular big power camp. Three prime examples are Japan, Turkey and India, each of which pursues a different path with differing levels of success, but all of which have found ways to enhance their respective national interests while maneuvering among the big powers.

### JAPAN

After decades of economic malaise, Japan has reasserted itself through economic and security means as an important regional middle power. Following the withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, for example, Tokyo played a key role in reinvigorating and pressing forward with the revised Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. At the same time, Japan is a signatory of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, seen at one time as a counter to the U.S.-backed TPP. By being a founding member of both, Japan reinforces its position as a central economic partner in the Asia-Pacific region, and keeps its trade options open.

Japan has stepped up its regional defense ties in Southeast Asia; with the United States and Australia; and into the Indian Ocean basin, partnering with India in the maritime space and establishing an overseas presence in Djibouti. Japan serves as a critical base for U.S. forces, and is an important component of the U.S. intelligence and missile defense architecture. But despite its increased defense activities and its strong alliance with the United States, Tokyo continues to resist Washington's efforts to force a decoupling with China, or even with Russia. Without a doubt, Japan sees China as a strategic threat. But it also sees China as an economic opportunity it can use to break free from its longtime stagnation. Japan's rivalry with China stretches back centuries, but Tokyo wants to avoid forcing a confrontation with Beijing. Instead, Tokyo competes along the periphery, from Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, and serves as an alternative in the region to Chinese infrastructure development funds.

### TURKEY

Turkey is another middle power active in expanding its sphere of activity and reshaping its relations with its neighbors and the big powers. Despite being

a NATO member, Turkey is seeking to expand its security relations beyond just the North Atlantic, and has purchased S-400 air defense missiles from Russia. Ankara has stepped up activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, challenging its neighbor and fellow NATO member Greece and triggering a European response, and continues to play a role in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. Yet while potentially risking its NATO relationships (including with the United States), Turkey is also challenging Russian interests in Syria and the South Caucasus, most recently intervening on the side of Azerbaijan in its confrontation with Armenia.

Despite economic difficulties at home, Ankara continues to pursue an ambitious foreign policy initiative driven by dreams of Pan-Turkic power reaching into Central Asia, Neo-Ottoman influence pressing down into the Middle East and North Africa, and leadership in the Islamic world as a primary Sunni power. The still-unbalanced nature of the multipolar world system gives Turkey more room for maneuver as U.S. and European interests often diverge, Cold War rivalries have softened with the rise of nonstate threats, and China has emerged as its own pole of power. None of the big powers wants to completely alienate Turkey, despite Ankara's contrary actions, and none has the strength or interest to force Turkey down a single path.

### INDIA

Nearly since independence from the British in 1947, India has asserted its nonaligned position as a middle power, with strategic autonomy a key policy priority. New Delhi's arms purchases straddle Russia and the United States (and Europe). Despite increasing U.S. pressure, that pattern is unlikely to change anytime soon. By dint of location and size, India was long the main center of power in the Indian Ocean region, but in recent years China's expanded economic, political and defense activities have challenged its central role. India is pushing back, and is expanding its defense cooperation with Australia, Japan and the United States, among others. Still, New Delhi is adamant that these relations are not about building a bloc against China, something that would violate the country's desire to remain nonaligned.

While Turkey is taking advantage of security and political weakness to expand its influence, and Japan laid the defense foundation for its reemergence for decades, India is responding to a fairly dramatic shift in the regional balance of power that has created a host of simultaneous defense, political and economic challenges. Nepal and Bhutan are no longer reliable buffer states; China has stepped up relations, investment and infrastructure development with Pakistan and Myanmar along the land frontiers and with Sri Lanka on the maritime front; and the Chinese navy now operates regularly from the Horn of Africa through the Indian Ocean. India is feeling pressure to break from its strategic autonomy and side with the United States to counter China, but continues to resist, hoping to exploit underlying tensions between Beijing and Moscow as much as it exploits U.S.-China tensions.

## Managing the Balance of Power

As we look out over the next several decades, the multipolar structure of the world system will create opportunities and incentives for other middle powers to assert themselves. Despite Europe serving as one big power pole, individual European nations are likely to increasingly assert their national interests. France has historic and strategic interests from West Africa through the South Pacific, for example, that do not necessarily align with overall European priorities. South Korea is seeking to assert itself as a middle power through international institutions, actively campaigning to head the World Trade Organization but also working with several international regulatory and standards bodies, trying to straddle the U.S.-China divide. Among the others to watch are the likes of Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Australia, and Mexico — some of which already are taking steps to play a stronger regional role, others of which are still dealing with internal dynamics.

As the middle powers attempt to balance or exploit the geopolitical space shaped by the great powers, we can expect false starts, overreach and miscalculation. We will also see the United States, China, Russia and Europe shifting and adjusting their behaviors and focusing on efforts to entice and redirect the middle powers. In many ways, then, middle powers will be the focus and lever of managing the global balance of power, retaining more flexibility of relations than during the Cold War, and more significance than during the post-Cold War period of U.S. hegemony. Amid multipolar great power competition, middle powers will become more significant, and perhaps less predictable. ☐

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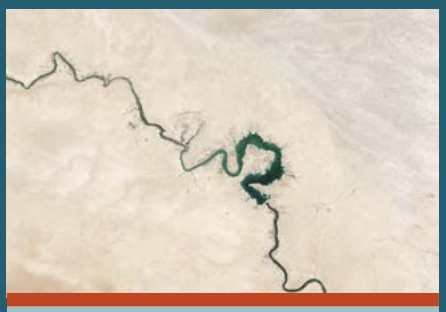

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