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Colin Gray's Geopolitics – Then and Now

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In 1977, America seemed adrift in the world. The Vietnam War had soured many on its post-World War II internationalist foreign policy. The new president, Jimmy Carter, proclaimed that the United States must overcome its inordinate fear of communism, reduce military spending and overseas commitments, focus on international human rights, and become a much more restrained power. From this perspective, the massive nuclear arsenals of both sides rendered any sensible resort to war impossible, a reality which should be driven home diplomatically through stabilizing arms control agreements and practices.

Foreign policy conservatives of both parties, however, were alarmed that the Kremlin did not seem to have gotten the message. The Soviets continued to enhance their nuclear capability, increase their ground, naval and air forces, and support proxy wars in the Third World. But the rejoinder – with the capability of both sides to deliver society-devastating nuclear weapons at intercontinental distances, with no need of forward bases, what did it matter to the United States, secure in its distant homeland?



Colin Gray, then with the Hudson Institute, had an answer. His influential 1977 monograph, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era, Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution*, helped to revive an understanding of international politics that had been largely discredited by its association with the Nazis and the German geopolitik of Karl Haushofer. Gray maintained this foundational assessment of international politics throughout his career, which took him through the end of the Cold War, the so-called post-Cold War, and what is now called the era of great power competition. This review of his thinking over that period can only be to a first order, given the sheer volume and breadth and depth of his work, and the subtle changes he made over time.

The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era

Gray's seminal study focused upon the contest between the continental power of the Soviet Union and the maritime alliance led by the United States. While fully acknowledging the ideological component of the conflict, and certainly not arguing for moral equivalence, Gray believed that the contest was ultimately about power (or differently put, about security), a contest taking place on the most enduring level – "Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent." Gray defined geopolitics as referring to the relation of international political power to the geographical setting. Although new technologies might alter the character of geopolitics over time, they did not invalidate its nature. This was true even of nuclear weapons, a topic that Gray took up in great detail elsewhere.¹

In Gray's view, the leitmotiv of the geopolitical perspective enabled one to discern trends, and even patterns, in power relations. "Geopolitics is not simply one set of ideas among many competing sets that help to illuminate the structure of policy problems. Rather, it is a meta- or master framework that, without predetermining policy choice, suggests long-term factors and trends in the security objectives of particular territorially-organized security communities." States tend to pursue a reasonably steady course in their foreign policies. Moreover, not only do the instrumental goals of foreign policy tend to endure, but so do the national "styles" with which those goals are pursued.

Geopolitical analysis, while predictive, is not deterministic. Geopolitical relations open and foreclose ranges of policy possibilities which particular societies and their governments may pursue – or not – as circumstance and mood take them. While granting this certain freedom of choice, the geopolitical perspective increases appreciation of those policies which are likely to be more, as opposed to less, successful.



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Gray offered a synthesis of the views of the three leading Anglo-American geopolitical theorists of the early twentieth century, each of whom emphasized the critical importance of a particular geographic domain: Alfred Thayer Mahan (the oceans), Halford J. Mackinder (the heartland), and Nicholas Spykman (the rimlands and marginal seas). Gray gave pride of place to Mackinder, while acknowledging the limits of the Englishman's analysis, as well as the evolution of Mackinder's thinking over time. (He thought Spykman's analysis of power politics was more important than his geopolitical framework.)

East-West political relations may fruitfully be considered as a long-term and inalienable struggle between the insular imperium of the United States and the "Heartland" imperium of the Soviet Union. In terms of physical geography, Eurasia (with Africa) may be conceived of as a centrally-placed island (the "World-Island" of geopolitical literature), surrounded (loosely) by an "outer crescent" of islands (the Americas, Australia). The interface between the power of the Heartland and the maritime imperium of North America are the "Rimlands" of Eurasia-Africa and the marginal seas which lap the shores of those "Rimlands." As of the mid-1970s, in geopolitical terms, superpower conflict may be characterized as a struggle between a substantially landlocked Heartland superpower, and a substantially maritime-dependent (in security perspective) insular super-power for control/denial of control of the Eurasian-African "Rimlands."

Control of the World-Island of Eurasia-Africa by a single power would, over the long term, mean control of the world.

The Heartland power, the Soviet Union, for reasons of geopolitics and its accompanying geopolitical culture, stemming far back in Russian history, coupled with Marxist ideology, was following a strategy of hemispheric denial – establishing its hegemony by denying the United States access to the World-Island of Eurasia. Although the Soviet's preferred means were undoubtedly nonmilitary, the development of a blue-water navy under Admiral Gorshkov, and establishment of air and naval bases on the perimeter of the World Island – complemented by a strategic nuclear force designed to provide "top cover" for conventional military operations – told the geopolitical story. A "Festung Amerika" (as Gray put it) might survive physically in a world in which Eurasia-Africa was organized according to the self-estimated security interests of the Soviet Union, but that would require a fortress discipline and illiberal fortress practices. America would be very different, in adverse ways.



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The proper strategy for the maritime alliance led by the United States to combat its Heartland/Continental rival in the contest of the Rimlands was to ensure that it could maintain access. Control of those Rimlands and marginal seas by an insular power was not synonymous with control of the World-Island, but it did mean the denial of eventual global hegemony to the Heartland power. The geopolitical theories of Mackinder and Spykman, translated for the late 1970s, insisted that America's security frontiers were on the Elbe and the 38th parallel in Korea (for prominent examples).

That seemed a daunting task in the mid-1970s, because the Heartland power theoretically enjoyed interior lines of communication. And, at least according to Mackinder, the advent of rapid means of interior communications, especially railroads, had overcome the inherent advantage of seapower during the Columbian era. Gray cited, however, the work of Albert Wohlstetter, demonstrating otherwise,² for example, in the Persian Gulf – but that held only if the United States counteracted the Soviet's hemispheric denial strategy. In addition to securing air and maritime access, the United States must have either a very robust local denial capability, or invest in a significant margin of strategic nuclear superiority. The challenge was especially acute in the one region where geography favored the Heartland power – Western Europe.

In light of his future geopolitical analysis, Gray's 1977 assessment of China is noteworthy. Both Mackinder and Spykman assigned China to the inner or marginal crescent, or Rimlands. In order to control its Far Eastern, and even Central Asian, holdings, the Soviet Union needed a strong forward position. Chinese outward pressure, north and particularly northwestwards, was an historical fact born of long experience with threats from Central Asia. China's technological weakness and general lack of industrial development afforded the Soviet Union a breathing space; but eventually, well over a billion Chinese must come to place at serious risk the entire Soviet position in the Far East. Soviet leaders would not choose to acquiesce in the eventual rise of China to first class superpower status. But in the short term, should America's capacity for collective action continue to decline, the ability of China to pursue a foreign policy course independent of, let alone in opposition to Moscow, could shrink markedly.

The Fall and Rise of Geopolitics

Gray continued to use and refine this basic geopolitical analysis for the remainder of the Cold War, emphasizing how to exploit the inherent advantages of the insular/maritime power of the American-led alliance. He was of the view that the relevant geostrategic question was not one of land power versus sea power; it was the translation of superiority in one geographical environment to superiority overall. In modern times, powers superior at sea had more easily



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generated complementary, superior land power than powers superior on land had developed a fighting advantage at sea.³

That advantage had again proven true with the success of the insular/maritime alliance during the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, many in the scholarly and policy communities proclaimed the death of geopolitics. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, however, Gray insisted upon the continuing relevance of traditional geopolitical analysis. "Today, notwithstanding the reality and exaggeration of transnational phenomena, world politics is still keyed to territorially based and defined states." But Gray suggested that some rethinking was in order. By far the most influential geopolitical concept for American statecraft had been Mackinder's idea of a Eurasian Heartland, with the complementary policy of containing the heartland power of the day within, not to, Eurasia. But Gray felt that there was an urgent need for constructive geopolitical analysis for the twenty-first century.⁴

Why? Gray pointed out that the emerging Chinese superstate was located in Eurasia, as the Eastern Rimland of the historical Heartland, while its long sea coast flanked the principal sea lines of communication of the great maritime, manufacturing, and trading empire of Japan. China had weight and position. Unlike the Soviet Union (Russia), China was not a landlocked power, and it could not be landlocked by a prudent U.S. containment policy. "Indeed, because of size, character of territory, population, social habits, and location, it would be difficult to exaggerate the potential positive or negative contribution of China to international order."

In *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (2004), Gray called upon the United States to use its preponderant geopolitical position to protect the international order it had fashioned since the end of the Cold War.⁵ Of particular importance in his canon is *Another Bloody Century* (2005), in which he argued: "Irregular warfare between states and non-state foes may well be the dominant form of belligerency for some years to come, but interstate war, including great power conflict, is very much alive and well. In fact, today, while most eyes are fixed on irregular forms of conflict as the supposed wave of the future, the next round in strategic history's cycle of great power antagonism is already taking shape."⁶ He argued that new technologies, to be effective, still had to be applied within a geographic context. Above all, Gray insisted, the logic of geopolitics pointed to Sino-American rivalry and conflict, as it had to the enmity between Athens and Sparta, Rome and Carthage, and rather more recently, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is all too easy to predict the rise of a new menace from the Heartland of continental Eurasia, a Sino-Russian axis. Already, it is beginning to appear likely that the geopolitical pattern of the twentieth century will



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repeat itself. The maritime world led by the United States will be locked in a protracted struggle, probably a new Cold War, with a Eurasian continental coalition. The only major uncertainty lies in the identity of China's strategic partners: Russia? Russia and EU-Europe? EU-Europe alone?

Russia was certainly the most probable partner for China, in Gray's opinion, despite the many deep sources of Sino-Russian antagonism. However, in international politics the enemy of my enemy – in this case, the United States – is my friend (at least for a while). But should the antagonism between Moscow and Beijing prove fatal for alliance cohesion, Gray contended, China would strive energetically to find other partners in its quest to become the other pole in a new bipolar international system.

During the decade of the 2010s, the financial crisis that roiled the West, coupled with an increasingly assertive China and revanchist Russia, brought great power competition – and geopolitics – back into public focus, as Gray had predicted. In 2015, he began to formulate his own ideas about geopolitics somewhat differently. "I admit freely that my current close acquaintance with Spykman's writings has made me noticeably more critical of Mackinder than once was the case" – possibly because of the former's detailed treatment of the Rimlands and the kind of warfare its mastery required, which made better sense of the geopolitics of the emerging conflict with China.

Mackinder's understanding of strategy in 1904 and even subsequently was fundamentally unsound. World history has not been driven by an ever renewed struggle between continental landpower and largely insular seapower. Instead, 'joint' bi (now at least tri)-environmental endeavour usually has been dominant. Landpower and seapower have needed each other in every period of strategic history. Although Spykman waxed eloquent on the geostrategic benefits accruing to a superior circumferential seapower, he always insisted upon the vital advantages that flow to grand strategy as a due consequence of joint effort by land, sea, and also by air.⁷

In 2019, before the Covid-19 outbreak, Gray now assessed the emerging geopolitical situation as one of tripolarity – a shift of seismic significance – among a declining Russia (but one that had by no means forgotten its ancient geopolitical ambitions and fears), a rising China with imperial aspirations, and an America that, because of its geostrategic advantages and form of governance, was still in the best position to support world order.⁸

In theory, Gray noted, a contest with three players should encourage caution in policy and strategy because each would be fearful of weakening itself if it expended resources dealing



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with just one superpower, leaving the other unengaged. However, such a system of relations is thoroughly unfamiliar to all three superpower participants. They have radically distinct strategic cultures, stemming from their geographic position and historical experience. There can be no presumption of mutual understanding.

To be sure, Gray noted, Sino-Russian compatibility at the grand strategic level seems logical. Each is in possession of the asset most lacking and therefore most needed by the other. China is awash with people far beyond the level of strict need for relative greatness. Russia is a master of far more physical geography than it requires. Despite the commonality of authoritarian forms of governance, however, the narrow overlapping of Russian and Chinese interests is a connection of much fragility.

Conflict and some hostility in the relations among the three is therefore to be expected. Gray believed however that a tolerable condition of world order could still emerge. For reasons of geography, culture, and politics, the United States can and must play a critical role in bringing that about, by balancing would-be hegemonic powers in Europe (Russia) and Asia-Pacific (China). “This is a global, political, strategic, and – yes, moral duty that has fallen to the United States on behalf of all humanity. Provided the United States can remember that it needs to remain committed to order in both Europe and Asia, all should continue to be well enough.”

Colin Gray’s wisdom is especially relevant in light of the dynamic changes occurring in today’s geo-strategic environment and transcends the volatility of contemporary American political culture. Understanding and applying the lessons of Gray’s thinking and scholarship to 21st century realities should keep America’s ship of state on a safe and steady course.

1. *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution* (New York: Crane, Russak, September 1977). The quote is from Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), 41.
2. Albert Wohlstetter, “Illusions of Distance,” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (January 1968), 242-53.
3. See, for example, *Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West* (New York: Ramapo Press, 1986); and *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).
4. As to the critical theory argument, Gray acknowledged that geopolitics did involve imagined spacial relationships, which could be constructed differently, but that was true of any political theory, and this should not blind one to what is, and is not, practicable in the conduct of war. “Inescapable Geography,” chapter in Gray and Geoffrey Sloan, eds., *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).
5. *The Sheriff: America’s Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004).



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6. *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005).
7. "Nicholas John Spykman the Balance of Power, and International Order," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 38 (October 2015), 873–897. The specific reference to his changing views of Spykman is in footnote 4. In this context he noted his "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," in Brian W. Blouet, ed., *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defence of the West* (London: Frank Cass 2005), 17–35.
8. "The United States and World Order," National Institute for Public Policy, Issue No. 437 (Fairfax, VA: February 6, 2019). Gray remarked that two additional factors had to be entered into the geopolitical equation and the pursuit of world order: global climate change (about which Gray did not elaborate) and nuclear weapons. Large nuclear arsenals certainly posed a danger, but they were not going away, and he believed could be managed successfully.

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