

# The geographical pivot of history and early twentieth century geopolitical culture

PASCAL VENIER

*European Studies Research Institute, University of Salford, Manchester M5 4WT*

*E-mail: p.r.a.venier@salford.ac.uk*

*This paper was accepted for publication in July 2004*

This article offers a re-interpretation of the geographical pivot of history by setting it in the context of the international relations and strategic debates of the early twentieth century, and by engaging with the historiography of British foreign policy during the Edwardian period. The overall argument is that the prospective effort of Mackinder does not appear as merely speculative but is in fact rather well grounded in the fundamentals of British foreign policy and more directly relevant than hitherto assumed. Identifying a trend towards a shift in the equilibrium between land power and sea power, Mackinder emphasized – and perhaps over-emphasized – a Russian threat to British interests but considered that Germany alone only posed a minor threat. Such analysis seems to be remarkably in tune with British geopolitical culture around 1904, and with the ideas of the British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour. The way in which Mackinder further stressed that a combination of the two main continental powers would represent a major peril for Britain has hitherto been treated rather dismissively. This article however shows how twice during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 Wilhelm II attempted to bring such an alliance about. This article attempts to reassess the actual impact of the geographical pivot of history and more broadly of Mackinder's thought, usually considered minimal, on British foreign policy before 1914. Finally, a number of issues that seem to deserve further attention are suggested, in particular that of the influence exerted by Mackinder before 1914, and that of the genesis of Mackinder's conception of the 'pivot zone' or 'heartland'.

KEY WORDS: Mackinder, geopolitics, geostrategy, history, 1904

On 25 January 1904, the director of the London School of Economics, Halford J. Mackinder, gave a lecture on 'The geographical pivot of history' at the Royal Geographical Society. Seventeen years earlier, Mackinder had introduced the teaching of geography at the University of Oxford, and in this 1904 lecture he was seeking 'a formula . . . express[ing] certain aspects . . . of geographical causation in universal history' (Mackinder 1904, 421). He contended that the vast zone of continental and arctic drainage of Central Asia, had long been the geographical pivot of history and would remain the 'pivot of the world's politics'. As a consequence of this geographical legacy, he opined that the history of Europe was ultimately subordinate to that of Asia. This piece of work, at the crossroads between

geography, history and empire, can be seen as a provocative reflection on international affairs, seeking to demonstrate the policy relevance of geography in aiding statecraft.

William H. Parker's influential interpretation of 'The geographical pivot of history' (hereafter 'pivot') in his classic study *Mackinder, geography as an aid to statecraft* provides a useful starting point. In this study, he expounds that 'One reason why the paper had little impact in 1904, and would have been regarded by the Cabinet – had they heard it – as of little practical value, was that it was concerned with the future rather than the present' (Parker 1982, 159). The present problem at that time was, according to Parker, how to contain Germany rather than Russia. For Germany to ally herself with Russia was likely for France had already

done so, and Britain was preparing to come to an understanding with its nearest European neighbour. The immediate danger, if it existed, was from German industrial competition and naval rearmament rather than from land power in the Euro-Asian landmass. While such an interpretation may appear initially persuasive, it becomes untenable when the 'pivot' lecture is analysed within its precise historical and geographical context.

Much of the recent literature on the history of both geography and geopolitics has, therefore, stressed the importance of re-situating key texts such as Mackinder's 'pivot' paper within their original context (Kearns 1985; Blouet 1987; Livingstone 1992; Ó Tuathail 1992 1996). While international historian Paul Kennedy showed one way forward in his landmark essay on 'Mahan versus Mackinder: two interpretations of British sea power' (Kennedy 1983), more recently, so has strategic studies specialist Geoffrey Sloan in analysing each of the 1904, 1919, and 1943 versions of Mackinder's heartland theory, 'in the context of the unique periods of their formulation' (Gray and Sloan 1999, 3; Sloan 1999). This suggests the pertinence of articulating a fresh perspective on the 'pivot', which is mindful of international relations and strategic debates of the time, and engaging more fully with the historiography of British foreign policy during the Edwardian period.

A close examination of the 'pivot' paper reveals that a key dimension of the article was Mackinder's attempt to pronounce upon Britain's international position by identifying a number of major potential threats. The first was a perceived trend towards a shift in the equilibrium between land power and sea power, which Mackinder feared was turning in favour of the former, eventually resulting in a challenge to the primacy of British world hegemony by the continental powers. The second, logically derived from the first, but more immediate, was posed by Russia, 'the pivot state': 'Russia replaces the Mongol Empire. Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India, and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen. In the world at large she occupies the central strategical position held by Germany in Europe' (Mackinder 1904, 436). It is crucial to note a double mapping of the threats posed by the continental powers. Whilst acknowledging 'the central strategical [sic] position held by Germany in Europe', Mackinder clearly saw Russia as the major threat, and Germany only as a minor threat. Finally, he also considered the risk of an alliance of the two main continental powers, Russia and Germany, a major peril for Britain: 'The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the

marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia' (Mackinder 1904, 436). It is important to stress that potential threats identified by Mackinder involved either Russia, or worse Russia and Germany together, but never concerned Germany alone. Resituated within the context of January 1904, the position taken by Mackinder, and his attempt to mobilize the power of geographical scientific knowledge to back his views, represented a strong statement. His emphasis on Russia was firmly in opposition with the position taken by a number of other leading imperialists, such as the director of the *National and English review*, Leopold Maxse, a fellow member of the Co-efficients Dining Club, who underlined the German threat (Hutcheson 1989; Morris 1984).

Contrary to W.H. Parker's argument, the analysis conducted by Mackinder seems remarkably in tune with the thinking of the British decision-makers at the time it was conducted (Venier forthcoming). It is indeed unquestionable that Russia, engaged in worldwide rivalry with Britain, remained for decisionmakers in London the principal external threat to its interests. Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, as a strong supporter of the Blue Water school of strategy, held that the British Isles would be best defended by the Navy and that the primary purpose of the British Army was to contribute to imperial defence (Mackay 1985). Therefore, in a time of acute budgetary crisis, he further advocated concentration on issues of imperial defence and specifically the defence of India. That his outlook on foreign and defence policy was clearly characterized by 'Indocentricity' has been well documented (Williams 1991; Judd 1968). During the Army debates of March 1904 in the House of Commons, he stressed the Russian threat to the British empire, stating that 'no man can blind himself to the fact that the whole trend of circumstances in the East is to make us a Continental Power conterminous with another Continental Power, and that is the dominating circumstance which we have to take into account in framing our Army Estimates' (Dunlop 1938, 172) Undoubtedly, Mackinder was overestimating the Russian threat, but such an attitude was deeply rooted in Victorian and Edwardian geopolitical culture, sometimes to the point of bordering on paranoia (Towle 1980).

If the period leading to the Great War was indeed marked by the rise of Anglo-German rivalry, it is essential to bear in mind that before the First Moroccan crisis in 1905, Britain's relations with Germany were far from hostile, despite recurrent rushes of popular Germanophobia which erupted

at regular intervals (Kennedy 1980). After several unsuccessful attempts in 1898–1901, the momentum for an alliance with the German Empire had passed. However, maintaining good working relations with Berlin remained a priority for the British government, and its leader was still convinced of the community of interests between Britain and Germany. Significantly, in 1902, when Lord Selborne, the First Lord of the Admiralty, expressed some concern about the ongoing development of the German Navy, the British premier remained sceptical (Kennedy 1980, 255). Whilst involved in a policy of fleet building, the potential naval threat posed by the German fleet was not yet a key factor in British policymaking. The superiority of the Royal Navy over the *Kriegsmarine*, still in its infancy, was overwhelming, not only in 1902–4, but for many years after 1905 (Lambert 1999, 8). As Mackinder noted in 1905, ‘the Empire possesses . . . a fighting fleet equal to any two or three, other fleets’ (Mackinder 1905, 137). Mackinder’s perception of the risks posed by a Russo-German coalition has all too easily been viewed as an anachronistic facet of his work (Parker 1982, 159). However, this perception was a recurrent theme in British foreign policy debates before 1904, and especially so in the early months of the Boer War, when it became a major cause for concern for Britain (Corp 1979; Diplomaticus 1899). When it came to actual strategic planning, Germany was only perceived by the Admiralty as realistically posing a threat as part of a wider anti-British coalition. As a counter to this, in 1902 the Admiralty had pressed for the two-power standard, plus six battleships over and above the straight parity with France and Russia (Bartlett 1993, 99). The direct relevance of Mackinder’s analysis about the risk of a Russo-German coalition, usually treated dismissively, is demonstrated by the fact that twice during the Russo-Japanese War, Kaiser Wilhelm II did propose an alliance with Russia (Sontag 1928). A first attempt in October 1904 was unsuccessful (Steinberg 1970 1977–81), but in July 1905 the Russian Tsar signed the Bjorkö Treaty, a defensive alliance, even though the Russians were to denounce it a few months later (McLean 2001, 50–1). The possibility of such a continental alliance had been the cause of considerable concern in Britain, as it would have had very serious implications in the context of the ongoing Russo-Japanese war. Under the terms of the Agreements between Great Britain and Japan of 30 January 1902, Britain would have been bound to belligerence in a war between her ally and any two other powers (Nish 1966). *The Times* even got somewhat carried away in September 1904 by wrongly announcing that a Russo-German under-

standing had been reached (Steinberg 1970 1977).

It is not uncommon for scholars to read ‘The geographical pivot of history’ as directly recommending a precise policy of alliance. For instance, Robert Strausz-Hupé felt that Mackinder ‘advocated an Anglo-Russian understanding which, after nearly a century of estrangement, was concluded in 1907’ (Strausz-Hupé 1942, 43). However, it can be argued that the actual prescriptive dimension of the article was perhaps more limited, and primarily amounted to three key points. Firstly, Mackinder stressed the absolute necessity for Britain to contain Russia and stop the ‘pivot state’ from gaining access to the coast of Persia. He did not give any specific indication of how Britain might go about this, but maintaining the status quo in the Gulf was already a key priority for British foreign policymakers. This had been made clear by Lord Landsdowne in his ‘Persian Gulf Declaration’ of 5 May 1903, in which he forcefully stated that ‘We should regard the establishment of a naval base, or of a fortified port, in the Persian Gulf by any other Power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal’ (Monger 1963, 123). This view was further reinforced by the official tour of the Gulf undertaken by the Vice-Roy of India, Lord Curzon at the end of 1903.

Secondly, the article suggested the necessity for Britain to prevent the two main continental powers, Germany and Russia, from coming together. This can be understood as suggesting that it was crucial for Britain not to encourage Germany to follow a ‘pivot policy’ by displaying any kind of hostility. Finally, Mackinder considered how Britain could deal with what was clearly a worst-case scenario, a possible Russo-German alliance: ‘if Germany were to ally herself with Russia. The threat of such an event should, therefore, throw France into alliance with the overseas powers, and France, Italy, Egypt, India, and Korea would become so many bridge heads where the outside navies would support armies to compel the pivot allies to deploy land forces and prevent them from concentrating their whole strength on fleets’ (Mackinder 1904, 436). The author’s prospective thinking on this scenario is very interesting and deserves comment. Such an alliance would have revolutionized strategic affairs at the beginning of the twentieth century. It would have been most likely that in such circumstances France would have denounced her alliance with Russia, as the outstanding question of the annexation of the French provinces by Germany in 1871 remained an insurmountable obstacle to a Franco-German alliance (Keiger 2001). Incidentally, Franco-British relations had recently improved spectacularly,

thanks to the rapprochement of 1903, which was to lead to the Entente cordiale of 8 April 1904, a settlement of imperial disputes between the two powers and the starting point of active diplomatic collaboration (Andrew 1968, 201–15).

The expression of the 'overseas powers', used by Mackinder, seems to be understood as the powers of the outer crescent: Britain and her empire, her ally, Japan, but also the United States. Such a *de facto* solidarity between Britain and the USA, as assumed by Mackinder, is interesting in itself and appears consistent with ideas of a common Anglo-Saxon world so influential at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Mackinder, the maritime power's response to a continental coalition involved a form of containment policy. The suggested strategy of bridgeheads implied the need for Britain and her allies to develop a capacity for projecting power in the regions of the coastlands that she clearly did not have in 1904. At that time the British Army seemed ill prepared for a possible war with Russia, and the defence needs of India needed to be addressed. This obviously implied the necessary manpower resources, but there Mackinder placed his hopes on the potential represented by the empire (Mackinder 1905). Besides, an alliance between the maritime powers would have provided a sizeable number of men. A fascinating dimension of the last scenario is undoubtedly that an alliance of the two main continental powers would have posed the question of the very survival of Britain. This seems to be extremely representative of the ideological climate of social Darwinism.

Mackinder's article is generally interpreted as a pessimistic reading of the position of Britain in the world. Mark Polelle, for instance, thinks that, 'Mackinder should be recognized as a pessimistic prophet for recognizing and lamenting the overshadowing of the European nation-state by continental power centre' (Polelle 1999, 58). An alternative interpretation could stress that 'The geographical pivot of history' was primarily an 'exercise in "shock" tactics' (Heffernan 1998, 66), but also that beyond the prognosis, it was pointing towards changes needed for Britain to be able to meet the challenge of the new century. Mackinder and fellow social imperialists were actively promoting a solution based on the idea of constructive imperialism and imperial unity. Some lateral thinking may provide some useful reflections on whether formulas such as the *fin de siècle* spirit or the crisis of conservatism help us to grasp the mood of this group of Edwardians. For there seems to be something of an extraordinary voluntarism in the frame of mind of Mackinder and of his fellow social imperialists, together with a feeling of quiet

superiority, racial or otherwise, of the Edwardian British elites. If not offering a panacea, they felt that the empire gave Britain a major card to play, providing it was possible to bring about imperial unity. Mackinder further advocated tariff reform, which would allow for the economic integration of Greater Britain and the promotion of national efficiency through a programme of social and educational reform.

Gearoid Ó Tuathail has very aptly noted that 'the pivot is the new myth around which the British empire must reconsolidate itself' (Ó Tuathail 1996, 235). Such a constructive dimension is indeed central to the famous map of the 'seats of powers', which accompanied the article, and which was not simply illustrative but central to the argument itself (Mackinder 1904, 435). 'Man-power as a measure of national and imperial strength', an article Mackinder published in January 1905 in the *National and English Review*, offers some valuable insight into this positive vision (Mackinder 1905, 140). Mackinder makes a case for regarding 'Canada, Australasia, and South Africa as set like a crescent on the Turkish flag, with India in the place of the star'. This way of symbolically visualizing the imagined imperial community of the British White colonies, forming a crescent centred on India, is indeed noteworthy. It is symptomatic of the way in which racist views were central to imperial thinking in the age of social Darwinism and Anglo-Saxonism. It is interesting to resituate the use of such a visual metaphor, undoubtedly part of an effort to foster a process of nation identity building, that of Greater Britain, with Mackinder's organicism, which is already very well documented (Ó Tuathail 1992; Deudney 2001). An organic concept of history can be found in the meta-narrative developed by Mackinder in 'The geographical pivot of history'. As he put it, 'ideas which go to form a nation . . . have usually been accepted under the pressure of a common tribulation, and under a common necessity of resistance to external force'; elsewhere he refers to the way in which external pressures had had a 'stimulative' effect on the people of Europe (Mackinder 1904, 422–3, 428). In 1904, the task at hand was, in Mackinder's view, for the British empire to move towards imperial unity, stressing the potential threat posed by the 'pivot state' of direct relevance. Linda Colley has addressed the powerful role that French enmity played in the development of Britishness in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Colley 1992). Seemingly, Mackinder sought to identify Russia as a suitable enemy who, in turn, would stimulate identification with a Greater British nation. After all, had not the South African War of 1899–1902 offered an interesting insight into

how the Empire could react positively to a common foe?

Much of the thinking of scholars who have argued that Mackinder's ideas were largely irrelevant has been informed by the interpretations of international relations. This stresses the shift in focus in British foreign policy from imperial issues to European ones in the period between 1904 and 1914, while emphasizing the importance of Anglo-German relations and the way in which British policymakers almost exclusively focused on the German threat (Steiner 1969 1977; Williamson 1969). However, an important historiographical trend has emerged which has challenged this interpretation. International historians such as Keith Wilson and Keith Neilson have convincingly argued that imperial issues, and especially the defence of India, remained central to British foreign policymaking during the period leading up to 1914 (Wilson 1985 2003; Neilson 1995). They have stressed the limits of Euro-centricity, and the fact that Russia had a much greater impact on the formulation of British foreign policy than Germany. This suggests the pertinence of a reassessment of the relevance of Mackinder's thinking.

The relevance of Mackinder's thinking is perhaps best illustrated during the period 1906–14 by the Anglo-Russian convention on Persia, signed in 1907. It is essential to stress the centrality of strategic issues in the thinking behind the negotiations on the question of Persia. As Sir Edward Grey declared in a speech to the Commons on the Anglo-Russian convention on 17 February 1908: 'In making the Agreement in respect of these regions in Asia strategical considerations with us were paramount'. He also explained that 'Anyone who has studied the question of the Agreement between Great Britain and Russia would see that the first point all through in the minds of those who considered it has not been the commercial but the strategical importance of it. It is the strategical position which makes the Agreement desirable and essential' (Grey 1931, 60). A comparison of the map of the Anglo-Russian convention with that of the pivot area gives a striking revelation of the similitude, as Persia was divided into three zones of influence. In addition to a Russian northern zone, the creation in the East of a British zone of influence and to the South of a neutral zone kept the Russians, confined to the northern zone, away from the coast of the Gulf.

A number of historians maintain that this focus on imperial policy did continue after the agreements of 1907 (Wilson 2003; Neilson 1995; Siegel 2002). Keith Wilson has shown how as late as 21 July 1914, in a key memorandum on Anglo-Russian relations in Persia, it was stressed that

after seven years HM Government are faced with the urgent necessity of taking stock of their position in Persia, for the incapacity of the Persians and the steady advance of Russia have together created a situation which cannot be allowed to drift any longer without the most serious danger to those British interests whose maintenance constitutes one of the most cardinal principles of Imperial policy.

and that

the first principle of our foreign policy must be genuinely good relations with Russia, and founded on the belief that if we do not make relatively small sacrifices, and alter our policy, in Russia now, we shall both endanger our friendship with Russia and find in a comparatively near future that we have sacrificed our whole position in the Persian Gulf, and are faced in consequence with a situation where our very existence as an Empire will be at stake.

K. Wilson 1995, 185–6

It should be noted, however, that Mackinder's strategic thinking was itself evolving during this period. As early as January 1905, he was already involved in revising and slightly expanding his conception of the potential threat posed by the continental powers to include the Ottoman Empire:

Egypt may rank in this view as essentially a part of the Indies, for Turkey, like Russia and Germany, is Continental, and by no means wanting in crude, fanatical man-power, which railways are in process of mobilising. You cannot send ironclads into Syria, but a Continental Power or Allied Powers in possession of the Suez canal would hold the most central naval base in the world.

Mackinder 1905, 140

## Conclusion

Examination of the international context in 1904 reveals how Mackinder's analysis of potential threats was both remarkably in tune with British geopolitical codes – and geopolitical culture – around 1904, and with the ideas of the British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour. The prospective effort of Mackinder does not appear as merely speculative, but as both extremely well grounded in the fundamentals of British foreign policy, and therefore extremely relevant. A number of issues seem to deserve further attention, in particular that of the influence exerted by Mackinder before 1914, and that of the genesis of Mackinder's conception of the 'pivot zone' or 'heartland'.

An evaluation of the existing academic literature on Mackinder reveals a broad consensus on the

extremely limited influence of the 'pivot' on the actual elaboration of British foreign policy prior to the First World War (Parker 1985, 28; Ó Tuathail 1998, 18). Whilst it is well established that Mackinder did have a degree of political access to a number of leading politicians such as Richard Haldane and Sir Edward Grey, and that he was involved in a number of political groups such as the Co-efficients or the Compatriots' Club, it is extremely difficult to identify the influence of his work. In the absence of clear evidence, Brian Blouet simply notes the possibility of such influence, and he writes that 'Sir Edward Grey, and particularly Haldane found Mackinder's views interesting, and both became members of the Liberal government that signed the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907' (Blouet 1987, 117). The present article has shown a number of ways in which the 'pivot' appeared relevant to British foreign policy between 1904 and 1914. If this suggests the pertinence of further archive-based research into the possible influence of Mackinder's thinking on British foreign policy making, it is necessary to remain cautious, as direct relevance does not necessarily imply direct influence. This is all the more so in the light of Patrick O'Sullivan's remark that 'It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which geopolitical ideas have directly influenced policy and action or whether they merely reflected the *zeitgeist*, with both theories or actions manifesting ambient attitudes' (O'Sullivan 1982, 57).

Whilst the present re-examination of the 'pivot' shows that much of Mackinder's strategic thinking was well grounded in the realities of the international relations of the early twentieth century, the heartland itself remains problematic. The heartland 'working hypothesis', unproven yet un-refuted, was soon to become a major element in Mackinder's *Democratic ideals and reality* (Mackinder 1919), losing a hyphen in the process, and later assumed the condition of a theory. As such, it really took on a life of its own, becoming, and to this day remaining, one of the most influential theories in Western strategic thought (Gray 1988; Dodds 2000). As such, it perhaps deserves further research in order to be carefully debunked. This could involve exploring the genealogy of the idea of the 'pivot zone'/heartland': notably how did Mackinder come to conceive the geographical pivot of history hypothesis and what was the influence of other contemporary studies on Central Asia? How did Mackinder, in an attempt to engage in futurology, set about using past trends – the American model? – to reflect upon the possible development of the pivot area? What were the methodological issues that arose from its very definition? And in what ways and to what extent was he consciously

involved in bringing geographical truth to established policy principles?

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Brian Blouet, the two anonymous referees and the editors, Klaus Dodds and James Sidaway, for their helpful comments.

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