Halford Mackinder and the ‘geographical pivot of history’: a centennial retrospective

KLAUS DODDS* AND JAMES D SIDAWAY†

*Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX
E-mail: k.dodds@rhul.ac.uk

†Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117570
E-mail: geojds@nus.edu.sg

On geographical pivots

In June 2004, the Yale historian Paul Kennedy wrote an article for the British daily The Guardian entitled ‘the pivot of history’ (Kennedy 2004). Despite the omission of the word ‘geographical’, it was readily apparent that the opinion-piece was referring to Halford J. Mackinder’s ‘The geographical pivot of history’ presented to the Royal Geographical Society on 25 January 1904 and published in the Geographical Journal three months later. Why would readers of a centre-left British newspaper be interested in a long dead conservative and arch-imperialist and a paper delivered 100 years ago? Kennedy proposed that the value of Mackinder’s paper was several fold – it not only pointed to the significance of distance/terrain/climate in shaping the conduct of international relations, but it also enjoyed a predictive value and designated the direction of world history against the backdrop of what Mackinder (1904, 421) termed ‘the end of a great historic epoch’. But Kennedy was also pointing to Mackinder’s contemporary geopolitical resonances:

Right now, with hundreds of thousands of US troops in the Eurasian rimlands and with an administration constantly explaining why it has to stay the course, it looks as if Washington is taking seriously Mackinder’s injunction to ensure control of ‘the geographical pivot of history’. Some of today’s US neo-con intellectuals make admiring reference to former British rule in that region, and have called for the creation of a US ‘colonial office’.

Kennedy 2004

The neo-conservatives in Washington (and elsewhere) may be running for cover, but there is a pervasive sense of geopolitical shifts, and foreign policy appears to have a prominence in US politics that has not been evident since the US ‘containment’ of ‘communism’ came unstuck in the fields of Vietnam nearly 40 years ago (see Halper and Clark 2004).

Delivered at the start of the twentieth century, Mackinder’s paper coincided with the establishment of academic geography within many European universities. Due to shifting circumstances, Mackinder contended that the discipline would need to transform its focus from exploration and discovery to closer survey and synthesis in the new era. He therefore spoke of the end of the age of European discovery (‘the Colombian age’), the period dating from the Portuguese voyages of the fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century. In its place, a ‘post Colombian era’ would emerge and countries such as Britain would have to be prepared to confront a fundamentally different global scenario, notably the rise of land power in Eurasia. This might well entail a landscape filled with new dangers and opportunities residing in the ‘geographical pivot’ region of East-Central Europe, Central Asia and Russia. Later relabelled the ‘heartland’ (and the surrounding areas – ‘the rimland’), Mackinder’s subsequent writings warned of the tremendous resource and military potential of land-based countries such as Germany and Russia in comparison to sea powers such as Britain (for example, Mackinder 1919).

The ‘geographical pivot of history’ paper certainly became widely referenced. Despite its jeremiad qualities with regard to British imperial performance, it crops up far and wide, from the mid-twentieth century writings of Argentine and Portuguese army officers (see Dodds 2000; Sidaway and Power forthcoming), in Japanese geopolitics of the 1930s (Narangoa, 2004) to (as Nick Megoran explains in this issue) contemporary musings by Uzbek intellectuals. The rise of the Soviet Union, the onset of the Cold War and all the conflicts and intrigue in the Middle East, Asia and Central Europe (labels for
places that themselves embody a mode of portioning and describing the world, seen too from a Western vantage point) signalled the importance of the ‘rimland’ regions (the Middle East, South East Asia and Central Europe, for example) surrounding the ‘heartland’ power. The development of geopolitical texts about power, space and international relations in the twentieth century frequently drew upon Mackinder’s legacy. Hence the 1904 paper is ‘generally considered to be a defining moment in the history of geopolitics, a text to which histories of geopolitics invariably point’ (Ó Tuathail 1996, 25).

The coming of air power (anticipated in one of the commentaries that were published with Mackinder’s paper and which are reprinted in full in this special issue) permitted decades of further elaborations and reviews (Brobst 2004). Plaudits for Mackinder’s ‘far-reaching’ strategic vision continue (Gray 2004). In turn, critical readings of Mackinder remind us that the geographical and ideologica categories of East and West in the Cold War overlaid (but did not entirely displace) prior geographical imaginations developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Brennan 2001). As Colls points out, however:

Mackinder’s country was Britain . . . He argued that, after Columbus, Britain the Island had moved from the world’s edge (painted in Celtic tones – ‘dark rocks . . . bird haunted skerries’) to the world’s centre [here Colls refers also to Mackinder’s 1902 Britain and the British seas] . . . [he] was influential not only because he confirmed the naturalness of the Island region, but also because he had projected his geographer’s imagination forward. A new age was dawning, where global power would rest not on the seas . . . but on land masses, and in particular on the central European land mass. Whoever controlled that, he said, controlled the rest.

Colls 2002, 238–9

Mackinder’s brio was circumscribed by anxieties and doubts about Britain’s future performance. Beneath the surface, it is not hard to find parallels in much of today’s US policy and geopolitical rhetoric about the twenty-first century global strategic picture.

Returning to Mackinder and his times, however, it is hard to separate the impacts of the 1904 paper, which is our focus in this centennial special issue, from those of Mackinder’s other pronouncements and writings on education, imperial trade, banking, ‘man power’ and the so-called English tradition (see Blouet 1987; Kearns 1993). The pivot area became heartland and shifted its axis somewhere between the Geographical Journal paper and his books before and after. Indeed, Mackinder’s Pivot paper and writings are, in the words of Heffernan (2000, 348) part of ‘related quests for imperial and educational reform’. Heffernan goes on to describe a Mackinder:

...driven by an almost mystical primitivism which led him to champion an educational system based on visual skills [hence the role for geography as observation and visualization] ... Drawing on Rousseau, Mackinder believed that it was only through such educational reforms that a new British imperial race would emerge.

Heffernan 2000, 348

In other words, British citizens (and that meant appealing to a far larger body of people following nineteenth and twentieth century enfranchisement) would have to be inoculated with a geographical sense of Britain’s imperial trading and strategic interests.

Ironically, the relative decline of the British Empire would soon become evident. Mackinder’s advocacy of imperial trade preferences was part of the moves to forestall this. But British policy (and the position of industrial and financial capital) was divided and it was only when the Great Depression came along that the balance moved against the old commitment to free trade and open markets (Anderson 1992). As British power continued to weaken in relative terms through the inter-war years, so British dependency on US material and forces became all the more clearer in the run-up to the Second World War. Henceforth any moves to outmanoeuvre the heartland powers would only take place under the largesse of the United States.

What has also framed this centennial perspective, moreover, are the twist of events and proliferation of more contemporary geopolitical discourses following ‘9/11’. Jennifer Hyndman’s commentary for this special issue of the Geographical Journal touches upon the ways that contemporary US foreign policy has been redirected towards a region described by Mackinder as within the pivot – ‘Central Asia’. Cold War ‘containment’ – informed, so it has been claimed, by Mackinder’s ideas – became ‘rollback’ (in the 1980s and 1990s) and then a forward-looking neo-imperial US strategy in Central Asia. Yet the popular ideology of American Empire is now grounded on gross simplifications; the ‘war on terror’ overwrites places, complexity and permits few grey areas. As Felix Driver (2003) has recently warned, the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath points to the roles of geographical and cultural ignorance in the United States (and elsewhere), for all the apparent accumulation of knowledge, ‘intelligence’, and understanding.

Mackinder provided (and continues to provide for some writers) a relatively simple and accessible
Introduction: Halford Mackinder and the ‘geographical pivot of history’

Guide to the complexities of world politics – global terms, grand historical generalizations, visually appealing and impressive maps and a series of explicit and implicit policy recommendations. Arising at the same moment when the label ‘geopolitics’ entered circulation, the Pivot paper was thereby: part of an imperial, Eurocentric planetary consciousness. This was a masculinist, ex-cathedra vision of a dangerous world viewed from the commanding heights of governmental and academic institutions.

Heffernan 2000, 348

Yet around the edges, the Pivot paper does register some limits of Western perspective. Mackinder asks of his audience:

... therefore, for a moment to look upon Europe and European history as subordinate to Asia and Asiatic history, for European civilization is, in a very real sense, the outcome of the secular struggle against Asiatic invasion.

Mackinder 1904, 423

Mackinder then resorted to the racist categories of his time and place, such as ‘the yellow peril’. Arguably, however, such racially coded anxieties were symptomatic of power shifts that could already be discerned, but whose parameters were not yet clear.

This special issue thus seeks to evaluate the varied intellectual and political legacies of Halford Mackinder, with particular reference to what must be the most influential paper ever to have appeared in the Geographical Journal. As Mike Heffernan (1998) and Sarah O Hara et al. (2004) have contended, the paper was only one of many interventions seeking to make sense of a changing world. Imperial and trading rivalries in Europe and elsewhere were stimulating, as we have noted, insecurities about the future role of Britain and the Empire. The advance of American power made for uncomfortable viewing in London, Paris and Berlin (Ferguson 2004). Unlike nineteenth century colonial adventures in Africa and Asia, fewer territorial outlets apparently existed for new rounds of imperial competition in the twentieth century. There was, as Mackinder and other contemporaries such as Fredrick Jackson Turner were inclined to conclude, little opportunity remaining (with the exception of high-latitude polar regions) for Western powers to colonize and occupy other places (Kearns 1984 1993).

Although he had no deep knowledge of Russia and Central Asia, Mackinder suggested that the resources, railways and remoteness of the heartland would prove an irresistible force in the future. Britain and other sea-based powers such as the United States would have to respond to the challenge posed by the heartland power and defensive readiness allied with imperial trade and financial reform was a necessity. Britain could not afford to be complacent. The Pivot paper was therefore part survey, part futurology and part, in the words of Heffernan, ‘shock tactics’ (Heffernan 1998, 55). At the centre of this is the map of ‘The natural seats of power’. Ó Tuathail (1996, 31) is surely right in asserting that this ‘is perhaps the most famous map in the geopolitical tradition’. For Ó Tuathail:

Huge swathes of territory are stamped with definitive positionality and function: ‘Pivot Area,’ ‘Inner or Marginal Crescent’... These are the macrogeographical identities around which Mackinder spatializes history and reduces it to formulaic equations...

Ó Tuathail 1996, 33

But, as Paul Kennedy recognized, neo-conservative intellectuals in the United States and others have frequently seized upon such geographical and historical simplicities in order to pursue particular new imperial strategies. Moreover, Barkawi and Lafoy point out how:

... the US is establishing an arc of military bases across central Asia and developing patron–client relations there. Such strategies of intervention and imperial control point to continuities not only with past US engagements in the Third World but also with older histories of imperialism.

Barkawi and Lafoy 2002, 124

Through these Central Asian strategies, plus Russian, European and United States manoeuvring in the Balkans and East-Central Europe, and the Caucasus, Mackinder’s putative heartland has taken on new resonances and scope.

The Contributors

The opening paper is by one of Mackinder’s biographers, Brian Blouet, and seeks to explore the composition and significance of the imperial vision of his subject. Given the breadth of Mackinder’s academic, political and vocational portfolio, it is important to understand the context that shaped the delivery of the 1904 paper to the Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society. Prior to the paper’s delivery, Mackinder had become intensely concerned about Britain’s trading and political profile in the context of rising American and German economic competition. In the face of this geo-economic milieu, his support for free trade evaporated and Mackinder became a passionate advocate of imperial
protectionism allied with a British imperial league in order to sustain Britain’s advantage in the world. Thus one way to interpret the Pivot paper is as a piece of long-term policy advice to the British Foreign Office and its Defence Ministry – Britain needed to urgently develop its strategic and trading links with the British Empire in order to ward off the threat posed by continental (and any future sea) powers.

Pascal Venier’s contribution here seeks to locate Mackinder and his ideas within the setting of early twentieth century international history. He suggests that there was little direct interest in the paper within the foreign policy establishment, in part because it was excessively speculative but also due to the fact that Mackinder’s prediction of a future Russian threat (in the form of the heartland power) was (as some critics contended) out of kilter with contemporary fears of a resurgent Germany. Venier suggests that this thesis is too convenient – the British Prime Minister Balfour shared Mackinder’s concerns over the future intentions of Russia and a possible Russian–German alliance, for example. Moreover, many military and political figures were worried about how India might be defended if Russia sought to continue the ‘Great Game’ in the coming decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps, therefore, we should understand Mackinder as someone who not only reflected the strategic zeitgeist of the era but also who challenged his contemporaries to wrestle with the global strategic picture.

Gerry Kearns’s paper considers the intellectual and ‘scientific’ debates of the early years of the twentieth century. Kearns demonstrates how Mackinder’s imperial vision was rooted in a longer term commitment to the teaching of geography within the universities (and therefore the provision of trained school teachers of geography and an imperial spirit) following the publication of the influential 1885 Keltie Report. Informed by social Darwinism and the imperial politics of the period, the Pivot paper was concerned with the role of nature, environment and ‘race’ and the shaping of imperial Britain. In the context of a ‘closed world system’, Mackinder’s analysis pointed towards the need for increased competitiveness in a highly inter-connected world. However, as Kearns notes, we can find evidence of a rather different global vision presented by the anarchist geographer, Peter Kropotkin. Instead of focusing on imperial competition, Kropotkin called for co-operation between communities and societies and was more wary of imperial hubris.

Nick Megoran’s paper considers the putative pivot region in a more contemporary setting of Islam Karimov’s Uzbekistan. Megoran’s research has been informed by scholarship in several languages. Examining three writers – one Russian, one Uzbek and one American – interest in Mackinder (and the Pivot paper) in Uzbekistan is considered in diverse contexts. This interest is not without precedent, however, as previous generations of Soviet and American authors have analysed the paper and its applicability to the pivot region/Central Asia. But as Megoran warns, the recent writings on Mackinder are often superficial in terms of their intellectual coverage, as they seek simply to apply so-called timeless spatial truths about Uzbekistan and derive foreign policy advice for elites in this Central Asian Republic and elsewhere.

The Americas received comparatively little attention from Mackinder, whose focus is largely the ‘Euro-Asian’ landmass. Leslie Hepple, however, demonstrates that a number of North and South American geographers and historians have contemplated the significance of Mackinder for the societies and states south of the Rio Grande. In particular, Hepple looks at how a North American history professor (and policy intellectual), Lewis Tambs, speculated on the role of Bolivia as a supposed pivotal region within Latin America. In part, therefore, Mackinder’s work provided not only a vision, but also a vocabulary for analysing regional heartlands and associated rimlands and pivots in the context of Cold War and national rivalries in Latin America.

The final paper by Peter Mayell considers the Pivot paper in the context of New Zealand’s place in the world. Although Mackinder paid no attention to New Zealand per se, he noted how the Columbian age:

endowed Christendom with the widest mobility of power, short of winged mobility. The one and continuous ocean enveloping the divided and insular lands is, of course, the geographical condition of ultimate unity in the command of the sea . . .

Mackinder 1904, 432

Mackinder goes on to write of Europe:

. . . wrapping her influence round the Euro-Asiatic land-power which had hitherto threatened her very existence. New Europe’s were created in the vacant lands discovered in the midst of the waters . . . Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan are now a ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce, inaccessible to the land-power of Euro-Asia

Mackinder 1904, 433

Mayell notes how over the first half of the twentieth century, New Zealand’s men (and occasionally women) were drawn into a series of global and imperial wars on behalf of the ‘mother country’ (Britain). With the onset of the Cold War, New
Zealand developed a close security relationship with the United States. This broke down in the 1980s, when a Labour government in Wellington opposed nuclear weapons deployment and testing in the southern Pacific. This symbolic challenge from the periphery posited an alternative anti-nuclear geopolitics, in tandem with a growing recognition that these islands of the southern Pacific were neither ‘vacant land’ prior to white settlement nor merely to become a ‘new Europe’.

Following on from the papers, we are pleased to include David Hooson’s personal memoir of ‘Encounters with Mackinder’. Hooson provides glimpses both of Mackinder’s lingering impact at Oxford in the 1940s and of the ways that his ideas entered active service at the Pentagon in the 1950s. He wonders, given the manifest contradictions of contemporary imperialism and American power ‘beset by its own conflicts and monumental debt . . . How would Mackinder pronounce on all this today?’

In her commentary, Jennifer Hyndman stresses that new cartographies and finessed critical stances are required to trace (and challenge) the lineaments of (global) power and influence a century on from Mackinder. Yet, however necessary and promising these alternative visualizations may now be, Mackinder’s shadow persists, in so far as: ‘Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space . . . will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe’ (1904, 421).

Mackinder’s references to closing frontiers, to charted and occupied space and to global echoes all have intriguing parallels to more recent demarcations of ‘globalization’, notably Hardt and Negri’s (2000) widely read Empire. How and with what impacts Hardt and Negri (among other contemporary designations, forecasts and plans) will come to be viewed as the new century ‘progresses’ are even more intriguing and open questions. For Mackinder we can now say more. In particular, Ó Tuathail judges Mackinder’s vision to be; ‘a triumphalism blind to its own precariousness’. For:

In interpreting the ‘end of geography’ as a diversion from the struggle for territorial expansion to the struggle for relative efficiency among imperial states, Mackinder was oblivious to those who came to define it as the struggle for cultural and territorial independence.

Ó Tuathail 1996, 28

Yet at the dawn of the twenty-first century, imperialism is re-energized and reformulated. Neil Smith points out that Mackinder sensed how history and geography were entering a new relationship with the ways that social, political and economic changes would increasingly be inscribed in global relations:

What Mackinder glimpsed in 1904 exploded in 1914 . . . As an arch-anticommunist, Mackinder would have been horrified by the parallels between Lenin’s relational geography of capitalist expansion [in his Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism] and his own. But Mackinder too was prescient. His notions of an ‘explosion of social forces’ reverberating around the world and the ‘shattering’ of weak elements in the global system anticipate not just World War I but also Lenin’s own revolution in Russia.

Smith 2003, 13–14

The twentieth century now appears as a drawn-out and unfinished struggle over geography. Explosions of social forces and redefinitions of this struggle look set to continue.

Acknowledgements

The papers here were first presented at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) held at the London offices of the RGS-IBG in September 2003. We are grateful to David Hooson who acted as a discussant in London and set the audience thinking about how Mackinder was read in Cold War America, to the reviewers for The Geographical Journal and to the journal’s Editor John Briggs and the Managing Editor Gwen Lowman for their assistance and guidance throughout.

Note

1 It is instructive to compare Mackinder’s mappings with a cartography of global geoconomic power (Taylor et al. 2001) published in the Geographical Journal nearly a century on and with Dowler and Sharp’s (2001) feminist critiques of geopolitics.

References

Barkawi T and Laffey M 2002 Retrieving the imperial: empire and international relations Millennium: Journal of International Studies 31 109–27
Blouet B 1987 Halford Mackinder: a biography Texas A and M University Press, College Station TX
Brennan T 2001 The cuts of language: the East/West of North/South Public Culture 13 39–63
Brobst P J 2004 ‘Icarian geography’: air power, closed space, and British decolonisation Geopolitics 9 426–39
Dodds K 2000 Geopolitics and the geographical imagination of Argentina in Dodds K and Atkinson D eds Geopolitical
Introduction: Halford Mackinder and the ‘geographical pivot of history’

traditions: a century of geopolitical thought Routledge, London 150–84

Dowler L and Sharp J 2001 A feminist geopolitics? Space and Polity 5 165–76

Driver F 2003 Editorial: The geopolitics of knowledge and ignorance Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 28 131–2

Ferguson N 2004 Colossus Penguin, Harmondsworth

Gray C S 2004 In defence of the heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and his critics a hundred years on Comparative Strategy 23 9–25


Heffernan M 1998 The meaning of Europe Arnold, London

Heffernan M 2000 Balancing visions: comments on Gearoid O’Tuathail’s critical geopolitics Political Geography 19 347–52

Kearns G 1984 Closed space and political practice: Fredrick Jackson Turner and Halford Mackinder Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 21 23–34


Kennedy P 2004 The pivot of history The Guardian 19 June 23

Mackinder H J 1902 Britain and the British seas Heineman, London

Mackinder H J 1904 The geographical pivot of history The Geographical Journal 23 421–44


Mayell P 2004 Beyond the ‘Outer Crescent’: the Mackinder century in New Zealand geopolitics The Geographical Journal 170 368–76


Ó Tuathail G 1996 Critical geopolitics: the politics of writing global space University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

Sidaway J D and Power M forthcoming The tears of Portugal: empire, identity, ‘race’ and destiny in Portuguese geopolitical narratives Environment and Planning D: Society and Space

Smith N 2003 American empire: Roosevelt’s geographer and the prelude to globalization University of California Press, Berkeley