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*Special Section:
Discussing Geopolitics*



The Pivot Moves Eastward: Mackinder and the Okinawa Problem

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Keywords: China, geopolitics, heartland, Mackinder, Kissinger, Korea, Okinawa, pivot of history, Taiwan, U.S. bases

Introduction

More than one hundred years have passed since the distinguished British geographer and politician, Halford J. Mackinder, revealed his fundamental “pivot of history” theory (1904), which he later modified and adapted to a changing world. The first step of this revision process appeared immediately after World War I in his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. In 1919, he renamed the “pivot of history” as the “heartland” and formulated his famous dictum: “*Who rules East Europe commands the heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island [Africa, Asia, & Europe]; Who rules the World-Island controls the World*” (Mackinder, 1919, p. 194). At the height of World War II, Mackinder reinterpreted his original idea in an article entitled “The Round World and the Winning of Peace”. In this 1943 *Foreign Affairs* piece, he argued for a continuation of the grand alliance between the USA, the British Empire, and the USSR and suggested a containment policy vis-à-vis Nazi Germany.

Even today, Mackinder’s heartland idea remains among the most influential geopolitical theories.¹ This fact deserves special notice because world affairs have changed completely since Mackinder first presented his views in 1904² only three years after the death of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). In this paper, we will first introduce the

author, then summarize his above-mentioned theory and finally apply it to one of the most controversial topics in current Japanese-American relations: the discussion about a possible removal of U.S. military bases from Okinawa. In order to understand their importance within U.S. military strategy, it is necessary to consider the growing economic and military power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). To do this, it might be helpful to perceive mainland China as the south-eastern part of Mackinder’s heartland.

Halford J. Mackinder and “The Geographical Pivot of History”

Born in 1861, Mackinder studied geology, history, and law at Christ Church College, Oxford University. He started to teach geography at his alma mater soon after graduation and was appointed Reader (Associate Professor) in 1887, at the exceptionally young age of 26. In the 1890s, he was involved in the founding of the Geographical Association (1893), the London School of Economics (LSE, 1895), and the Oxford School of Geography (1899). As Oxford University was nevertheless reluctant to give him a full professorship, Mackinder moved on to become the director of the LSE (1903-08). After that, he concentrated on politics. While continuing to lecture part-time, he became a Member of Parliament in 1910 and stayed on in the House of Commons until 1922. In 1919, he served as British High Commissioner for South Russia, staying in Odessa (current Ukraine), a major port city on the northern shore of the Black Sea, where he tried to increase British support for the anti-Bolshevik forces. Although he did not

Aizawa, N., & Spang, C. W. (2011). The pivot moves eastward: Mackinder and the Okinawa problem. *OTB Forum*,4(1), 18-23.

¹ This did not stop one of the more recent proponents of geopolitical (or geostrategic) thinking, the American Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997, p. 38), from misnaming the British geographer as “Harold” Mackinder.

² It should suffice here to mention the current multi-polar international system; globalized industry and finance; the possibilities of modern means of communication like mobile phones and the internet etc.; the ongoing transport revolution including fast long-range aircrafts and high-speed trains as well as military technology such as ballistic missiles etc.

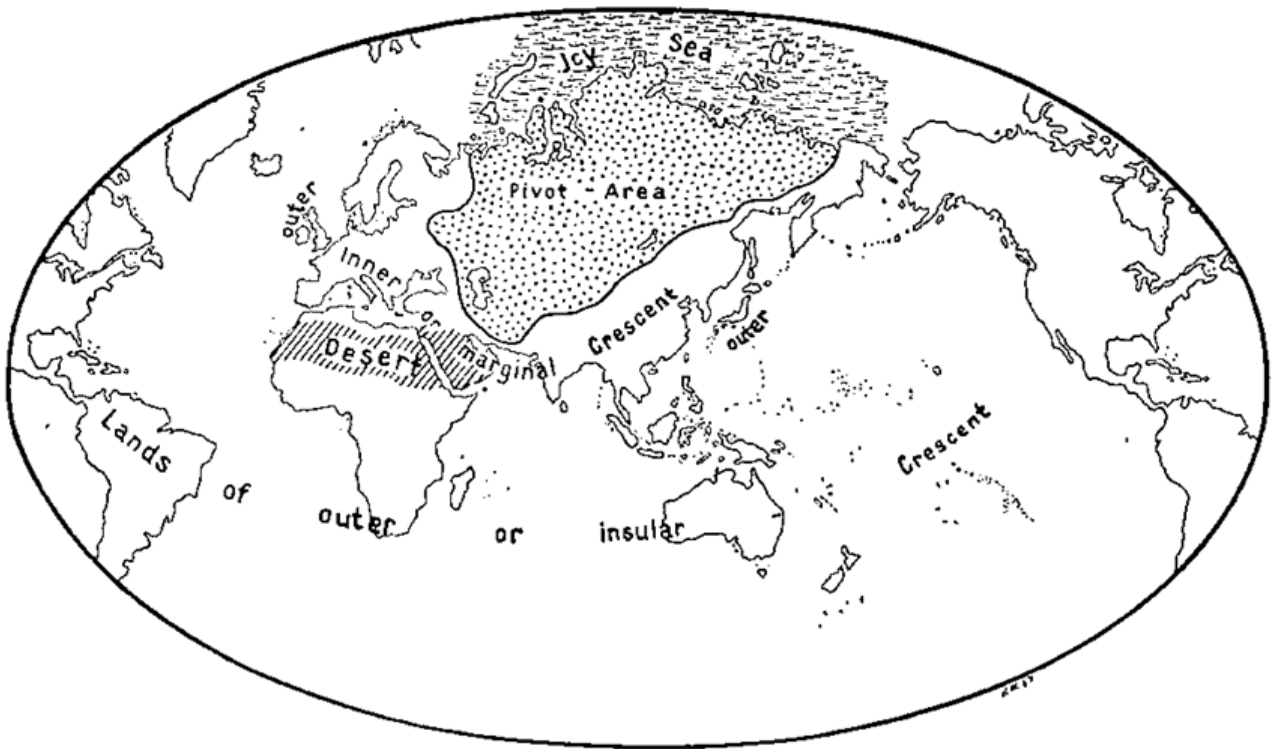


Figure 1. Mackinder's threefold division of the globe: (a) the pivot area, (b) the inner or marginal crescent, and (c) the outer or insular crescent. Reprinted from Haushofer, 1940, p. 406.

succeed, Britain conferred the rank of Knight Bachelor on him in 1920. Six years later, Mackinder was appointed to the Privy Council. In 1923, he finally got his own chair of geography at LSE although it took until 1934 before the first chair of geography was introduced at Oxford.

Mackinder first mentioned his “pivot of history” idea in a lecture he delivered at the Royal Geographical Society (est. 1830) in London in January, 1904, i.e., shortly before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05). Around that time, Russia looked like a huge threat to the British Empire. To counter this alleged challenge from Saint Petersburg,³ the government in London had already given up its long cherished policy of “splendid isolation” by concluding the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902) with Japan, a country that a few years earlier was hardly considered an equal match to any of the major European powers.

A few months after his speech, Mackinder published his paper in the *Geographical Journal*. On the first few pages, he explains

³ Until 1918, the seat of the Russian government was Saint Petersburg, not Moscow.

the geography of Eastern Europe and the northern part of Central Asia, the combination of which constituted the “pivot of history” in Mackinder's world view.

After that, Mackinder reflected on the major international conflicts before 1904. Following this, he went on to indicate the importance of the pivot area and to formulate his famous theory. Due to the fact that no serious military air power existed at that time, Mackinder focused on the opposition of land-power and sea-power. As a representative of the British Empire, which had been ruling the oceans with its Royal Navy for centuries, Mackinder naturally argued from a navy point of view. He claimed that this part of the world must be the “pivot of history” that cannot be attacked by means of sea-power. In concrete terms, he feared that Russian land-power would, in the long run, become more important than British sea-power.

In 1919, Mackinder altered the focus of his concept. In *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, he paid special attention to Germany and the new communist Russia. Mackinder stated that both sea-power as well as the newly developing air-power are essentially based on territory

and resources. He predicted that possible future cooperation between Berlin and Moscow could lead to the establishment of an invincible combination of air-, land- and sea-power. What made this scenario even more threatening to the British Empire was the fact that most of Russia's territory cannot be attacked by sea-power. Thus, Mackinder concluded that there was no chance for Britain to challenge a possible German-Russian alliance. As a result of this analysis, he suggested the creation of buffer states in Eastern Europe, which would prevent any close cooperation between Berlin and Moscow.

In 1943, Mackinder revisited his heartland theory again, considering the question whether it was still significant four decades after its creation. Between 1904 and 1943, the growing ideological divide along with two World Wars had overturned international structures completely. However, while borders had changed during these decades, geographical conditions had not. Furthermore, the build-up of industrial and military power in the heartland area underscored the significance of Mackinder's original idea. Therefore, he concluded in 1943 that his pivot/heartland concept was more valid than ever before.

Even though Mackinder's 1943 paper "The round world and the winning of peace" appeared after the battle of Stalingrad (July 1942 – February 1943), he wrote it before this crushing German defeat marked the turning point of the European war. Therefore, Mackinder was far from certain of an all-out Allied victory. His preoccupation was how to establish a lasting peace. He mentioned a new balance of power system, arguing for a continued alliance of the sea-powers with the heartland-country (USSR). This cooperation would leave Nazi Germany isolated and would eventually lead to some sort of stability by separating Eastern Europe and the heartland, i.e. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. According to Mackinder's 1943 point of view, a global balance of power system was essential to the construction of happiness and freedom of the people – an idea that bears some resemblance to Henry Kissinger's 1970s

world view.⁴ Having summarized the development of Mackinder's thinking in the European context, let us now turn to East Asia to find out if his heartland theory is still worth studying today.

China's Growing Power and the US Military in Okinawa

Until 40 years ago, things looked much different in East Asia. The turning point came in 1971/72, long before industrialization and globalization finally reached most of Asia. Between 1946 and 1971, the Chinese seat on the Security Council of the United Nations in New York was occupied by Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China (ROC), representing the island of Taiwan, not mainland China. While the Nixon-Kissinger administration was negotiating the opening of diplomatic relations between the United States and the communist regime in Beijing⁵, Taiwan not only lost its seat on the Security Council but also its membership in the United Nations due to a vote by the UN General Assembly in October 1971.⁶ Since then, the Republic of China (Taiwan) has been in a tenuous position, depending on U.S.-military support against a possible attack from the People's Republic of China (PRC, i.e. mainland China,). South Korea, now a successful democracy, was controlled either by autocratic rulers or by military dictators until 1987; and Okinawa was under direct U.S.-administration until 1972, a situation that allowed the U.S.-military to build as many bases on the Ryukyu Islands as they deemed necessary.

Since the 1970s, mainland China has transformed itself in many ways. Products made in China are ever present in our daily lives. Due to this fact and its abundance of

⁴ See Kissinger, 1979, p. 914: "By geopolitical, I mean an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium."

⁵ Relations between Washington and Beijing eased when Richard Nixon signed the Shanghai Communiqué on February 27, 1972, but it took until January 1, 1979 before diplomatic relations were officially established.

⁶ Please refer to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, October 25, 1971. It is noteworthy that the exclusion of the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan happened against the explicit wish of the Nixon administration.

human as well as natural resources, Beijing has gained more and more clout worldwide. The large number of Chinese emigrants, mostly in Asia and America, should not be overlooked either. Thus, in recent years, economically as well as militarily, the People's Republic of China has become one of the most powerful states in the world.

Looking at these developments from Mackinder's point of view, the emergence of China suggests that the "pivot of history" has shifted farther to the East.

Examining the controversy about the massive presence of the U.S.-military in Okinawa, it is obvious that the difficulty of relocating the bases has something to do with the geographical position of Okinawa between the main islands of Japan to the North, Taiwan to the South, and mainland China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) to the Northwest. China's increasing power and Okinawa's position relatively close to the new "pivot area" explain the reluctance of the U.S.-military to shift the bases to other places. Thus, even in the early 21st century, with its completely different weaponry and military strategy, land-power and location-value remain of essential importance, as indicated by Mackinder more than a century ago.

Conclusion

Early 20th century geopolitics has been summarized the following way: "*Fundamentally, classical geopolitics is concerned with the inter-relationship between territory, location, resources and power*" (Dodds, 2009, p. xx). Yet, this is by no means a thing of the past. Mackinder's classical theories as well as other contemporary geopolitical ideas are still thriving today. In Japan, for example, there seems to be a revival of public interest in geopolitics. It is noteworthy that a 1985 translation of Mackinder's book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* was re-released in Japan as recently as September 2008. Similarly, a 1940 Japanese translation of Karl Haushofer's book *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans* was republished in 2005.⁷ Even in the arts,

⁷ The Japanese translation was based on the 1938 (third) edition of Haushofer's book, which first

geopolitics seems to be *en vogue* in some quarters. In 1994, science fiction author Aramaki Yoshio published two novels with the word "地政学 (geopolitics)" in their subtitle, and they were then re-issued in 2005. Last year, one of Aramaki's works featured a short appendix about geopolitics in which he dealt with Mackinder's heartland theory in some detail.⁸

Returning to the Okinawa problem, it is obvious that the bases cannot be removed due to the paramount geopolitical importance of their location. The significance of Okinawa remains unchanged, or might even increase in the future, due to the following circumstances:

1. The geographical position of the island(s), close to the new "pivot area".
2. Land possession near the new "pivot area" is crucial to guarantee military efficiency, even in an era in which air-power is arguably the main means of military action.
3. The growing military and economic power of mainland China and the uncertainties around future developments in North Korea and in Taiwan have increased rather than weakened Okinawa's geopolitical importance over the last decades.

Finally, it should be noted that in Samuel P. Huntington's hotly debated 1993 article about the prospect of future conflicts between civilizations, both China and Japan constitute their own civilization while the United States of America represent yet another, i.e. "Western" civilization. Therefore, one might also turn to Huntington to explain why the bases are most likely to stay where they are: They can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid a "Clash of Civilizations".⁹

appeared in 1924. The re-issued 2005 version features two articles by Christian W. Spang as research material (研究資料).

⁸ Aramaki, 2010, p. 405-408.

⁹ For a closer look at Huntington's classic theory, please refer to the following article in this special section. Huntington calls the Chinese civilization "Confucian" not "Chinese", i.e., it can be seen as going beyond China.

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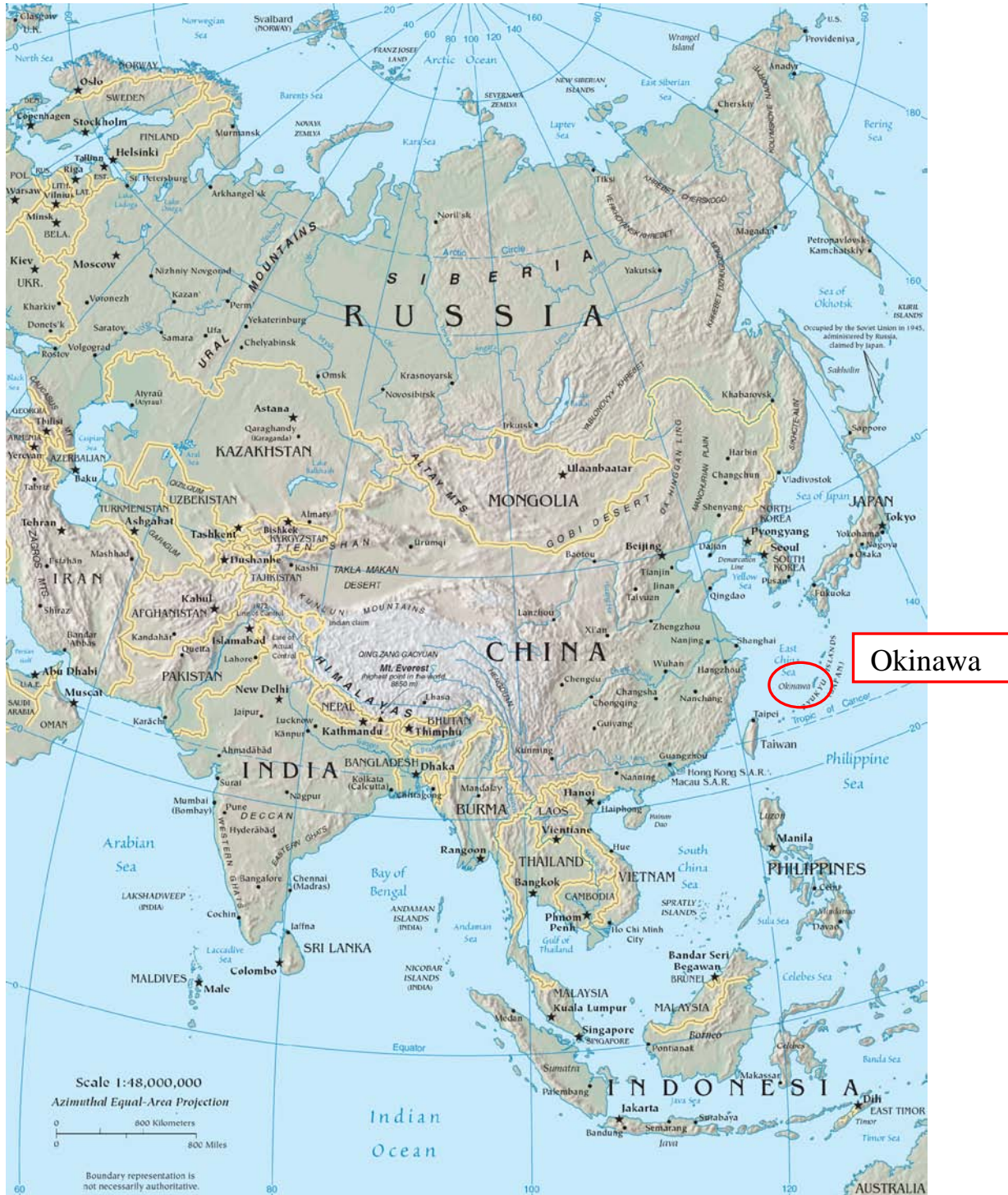


Figure 2. Map of Asia with Okinawa highlighted. Retrieved September 24, 2011, from wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Asia-map.png