

# MACKINDER'S HEARTLAND THESIS AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: RUSSIA'S GROWING DEPENDENCE ON CHINA IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UKRAINE WAR

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## Introduction

International Relations theorists tend to focus on a specific ontology determined by a research question (Wight 2006). The focus on states and their interests, regimes, institutions, identities, and norms, has been insightful (Waltz 2010; Keohane 1984; Wendt 1992). Such dedication may obfuscate reality, especially changes in state behavior and the forces that encourage such change. Moving beyond these ontological categories and focusing on geography and economics may highlight new political structures. Incorporating geopolitics, especially considering globalization, and associated technological innovation may realize new ontological frontiers. H. J. Mackinder is one such scholar who employed such an approach. His article "The Geographical Pivot of History" (1904) and book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1942) present such innovation. Mackinder's focus is geography and resources rather than states and their militaries. Developing categories like *heartland* and *world-island* offer insight into global politics. The core of Mackinder's argument is that whoever controls, or organizes, the heartland of the Eurasian continent controls the world's political system. The Russian state is currently in control of this vast physical space yet is not in control

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of any seaports necessary to project power globally. Mackinder warns that if Russia can gain access to a warm water port, then it will inevitably become the world hegemon (Mackinder 1942, 77-80; 99). This may become a possibility if the world's climate continues to warm and the Arctic region completely melts (Anderson 2009; Brooke 2012). However, this is not the objective of the paper.

This paper focuses on Russia's current economic isolation due to the war in Ukraine and the potential gain for China. The more Western states punish Russia, the more likely it will become economically dependent on China. The more dependent Russia is on China, the more China will exercise control over Russia. If China were to gain this political leverage over Russia, it would be in a good position to organize the heartland through loans, economic investment, and infrastructure development. The process of organizing the heartland is already in effect through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative. By organizing Russia in this way, China would have effective control over the territory. This fact, along with its navy (the largest in the world) [Burgess 2020], will enhance China's power. In other words, the international balance of power will firmly be in China's favor potentially allowing for its peaceful rise as the world's sole hegemon.

This article is broken up into three major parts. The first task is to explain the connection between the Western reaction to the Ukrainian war and Russia's increasing dependency on China. Western sanctions push Russia to trade with China more deeply, especially in areas that serve China's interests (Deveonshire-Ellis 2020). Limiting Russia's customers in this regard forces Russia to remain dependent on China. Dependency theory will be discussed to sustain this analysis. The second part of the paper links dependency theory to Mackinder's Heartland thesis. If China manages to mold Russia into its peripheral state, then it will effectively control a significant portion of the Eurasian continent. This paper's methodology is theoretical, combining geopolitics and dependency theory to analyze the significance of BRI data. Rather than studying states, this paper suggests exploring organizational principles. Economic dependency, culture, religion, nationalism, mutual interests, and norms are all examples of organizing principles (Haugevik and Neumann 2019). Organizing principles bring actors and resources together, creating policies that shape reality. By focusing solely on the state, for instance, one might be ignoring a wider and more complex reality.

Mackinder emphasizes at the end of the book, albeit crudely, that an Asian power can potentially conquer Russia and dominate the world (Mackinder 1942, 193). However, this article prefers to look at economic domination, specifically China's BRI initiative. The BRI initiative affords

China the ability to organize Russia through loans and physical infrastructure similar to what has taken place in Sri Lanka and other developing states (Freymann 2021). By financing Russia, China might be able to gain further political leverage over Russia. The concluding part of the paper suggests changes to international relations analysis. Rather than adhere to statist ontologies of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, this paper suggests moving beyond such a limited focus. A richer, more interesting analysis may be conducted by studying the concentrations of power independent of any geographic demarcation of territory.

## **The Ukrainian War and Mackinder's Heartland Thesis: China's Control of the Heartland**

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 (Brown 2022). From Russia's perspective, the invasion hoped to stop Ukraine from moving too close to the western world and joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO encroachment threatens Russia and has been part of an ongoing process since the fall of the Soviet Union (Mearsheimer 2014; Wolff 2017). For violating the sovereignty of Ukraine, the United States and the European Union levied heavy sanctions on Russia. Western powers are also supplying Ukraine with weapons (BBC News, March 24, 2022). The United States also banned Russia from using the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) system. The SWIFT system ensures a smooth, efficient, and speedy payment system for international transactions (see [swift.com](https://www.swift.com) accessed March 31, 2022). In response, Russia has sought alternatives to the SWIFT payment system (Eichengreen 2022). Russia and other anti-western states like Iran now rely on China's payment systems, backed by the renminbi to circumvent American power. Such a prospect may increase China's power and influence and undermine American hegemony as it undercuts American interests and hegemonic position. This serves the interests of China as it seeks to 'peacefully rise' relative to the United States, not simply because it offers an alternative to the United States Dollar and payment system, but because it increases its power and influence. Thus, Russia's growing isolation due to the Ukrainian War is pushing Russia into being subordinate to China. Growing Russian dependency allows China the leverage needed to accomplish specific goals such as further development of the BRI into Eurasia. This fits into China's grand strategy for creating its world-system.

Dependency theory and the World-systems Approach describe international politics as a product of economic relations (Martins 2022;

Jenkins 2012; Gulalp 1987). If one state is dependent on another, then that state may have to change its behavior (Ibid). If China continues to be the most significant sponsor of Russia in the face of western sanctions, Russia will become reliant on China. This growing reliance, or dependence, allows China the political power to influence Russian foreign politics and goals. The World-systems Approach may posit that Russia is becoming a peripheral state to China's core especially if China can constrain Russia economically (Wallerstein 1974). Such a relationship may also be viewed within asymmetric interdependence, where the Russia-China alliance is unbalanced in favor of Russia (Keohane & Nye 1989, 10). Since Russia needs China more than China needs Russia, China retains more relative power and ultimately can set the political agenda.

Simply put, Russian dependence on China will increase China's power relative to the United States. This gives China significant power over Russian territory and grand strategy. If Russia becomes a veritable vassal to China, then China can gain strategic access to the Arctic, Central Asia, and parts of the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. This will cause the balance of power to shift to China and the United States and Europe may lose significant international influence. India could also be isolated, its national security is vulnerable given its dependence on Russian resources and military weaponry and weapons systems (Kundu 2008). Geography becomes essential to this analysis. Mackinder's work on the importance of Russia and Eastern Europe is central to the international balance of power. Whoever can organize Russia alongside an advanced, numerically superior navy might be able to overtake the United States in power and influence thereby signaling the end to the liberal international world order.

To understand the potential for hegemonic change, Mackinder's Heartland thesis must be explained. Mackinder underscores the importance of geography to the balance of power. In "The Geographic Pivot of History" (1904), he offers a non-state-centric argument rather than focusing on the territorial circumstances of states. This article signifies the first time Mackinder attempts to construct such an argument focusing on the centrality of a specific region to world security: "my aim will not be to discuss the influence of this or that kind of feature, or yet to make a study in regional geography, but rather to exhibit human history as part of the life of the world organism" (Mackinder 1904, 299). The world's balance of power is a determination of this geography, specifically this notion of the pivot area also known as the heartland; both terms are used interchangeably (Ibid; Mackinder 1943). This area was never meant to be defined in precise terms (Ibid). In "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" Mackinder explicitly states this:

The Heartland is the northern part of the interior of Eurasia. It extends from the Arctic coast down to the central deserts and has as its western limits the broad isthmus between the Baltic and Black Seas. The concept does not admit of a precise definition of the map for the reason that it is based on three separate aspects of physical geography which, while reinforcing one another, are not exactly coincident (Ibid 597-598).

These three aspects are the wide lowland plains on the west, the rivers that flow across that plain, and the grasslands that allow for ease of travel (Ibid). In Mackinder's time, these territories were controlled by the Soviet Union. Now, they are divided into several states including Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, Mongolia and the islands of the Arctic (Mackinder 1904, 312). Mackinder discussed the 'pivot' region, that "vast area of Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to the horse-riding nomads..." (Mackinder 1904, 434). This particular area is deemed beneficial to whoever might control it and detrimental to whoever cannot. Mackinder continues "Her [referring to the pivot/heartland area] pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, On India and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen (...). She can strike on all sides and be strong from all sides, save the north. The full development of her modern railway mobility is merely a matter of time" (Ibid 313). If one state were to control this territory, then that state would be in a position to dominate the continent. Further, if the same state were to gain naval supremacy, then that state would essentially be able to control the entire world (Ibid). Technology such as railways would help organize the territory that would increase that state's power to such a great extent that hegemonic power would well be within its grasp (Ibid 314). Hence, exact boundaries were not a concern for Mackinder. Of greater importance was the power(s) with the ability to organize the heartland for the sake of domination.

Further, Mackinder understands the balance of power concerning geography. For instance, the heartland was important because it was inaccessible to naval power due to great mountains, plateaus, and deserts (Mackinder 1942, 1). Further, the low-land steppes to mountains made neighbors easy to invade by the power controlling the heartland (Ibid). Hence, for Mackinder, it becomes exceedingly important for non-heartland states to block heartland states from access to warm-water ports. The Crimean War was an example of this as any war in the Middle East. To ensure the balance of power, states must keep the heartland divided and small. Sea powers must maintain open seas as well as promote alliances between the rimland, those states along the border of heartland states such as the states of western Europe

(Mackinder refers to these as the rimland), and outer-islands, non-world island states like the United States. Thus, the heartland state can be effectively balanced against the world-island. For Mackinder, India and China will be useful in containing Russia and providing this balance. Russia must fail in its attempt to control all of the heartland due to the coordinated response by the rimland and outer-islands.

In summary, Mackinder's main contribution is the geopolitical importance of the heartland to world stability. A balance of power might be maintained if Russia is denied a warm-water port or if other states are denied control or the organization of the Russian heartland. Mackinder identifies two main threats to this stability: Japan (in 1904) and Germany (1942). Since Eastern Europe is the doorway to the heartland, it must be divided or controlled by the rimland or other world-island states. If a power could capture Russia without fighting a war for the heartland, that power would essentially control the world, as Mackinder's often-quoted but rarely-understood summary goes:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:

Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:

Who rules the World-Island commands the World (Mackinder 1942, 50).

Mackinder's key ontology is geography which shapes the makeup of the international order. Of great importance though is the technology that organizes the territory in question. The key word here is organize and not rule. Some scholars (Laqueur 2015, 99; Brzezinski 1997, 38) do not address this: it is not about possessing the territory but organizing it. A state may *control* another state if it can influence it through military means (Morgenthau 1985; Nye 2004). Organization is different through controlling key resources; owning key transport and communication infrastructure is central to this attempt. Mackinder warns the United Kingdom explicitly of the dangers presented by Germany having grown more powerful than Russia before World War I: "The Entente of 1904 between Britain and France was not an event of the same significance; our two countries had cooperated more often than not in the nineteenth century but France had been quicker to perceive that Berlin had supplanted Petrograd at the center of danger in East Europe...West Europe...must necessarily be opposed to whatever Power attempts to organize the resources of East Europe and the Heartland" (Mackinder 1942, 98). Organizing the heartland increases the power and influence of the organizer, making Russia much easier to control and even conquer (Ibid 150). Writing in 1904, Mackinder warns that if Japan were to defeat China completely and then overthrow the Russian empire, it would constitute the greatest threat to the international system as it would "...add an oceanic frontage to the resources

of the great continent an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot [heartland] region" (Mackinder 1904, 314).

Mackinder's analysis holds enormous explanatory power but it is now over a century old. He wrote for his specific time. Since then, there have been significant socio-technological changes which shape the relationship between geopolitics and geographical environment. Mackinder could not imagine the levels of economic, cultural, and social interconnectedness brought on by globalization (Ehteshami 2017). There has never been such an interconnected economy defining an international society driven by major technological advances like the internet and the cellular phone.

## **The impact of sociopolitical-technological change: Mackinder's Heartland Thesis applied today**

There are two main socio-technological differences between our international order and Mackinder's. The first is the technologies defining the BRI and the second is the impact of American hegemony. These two factors help us understand the political impact of the BRI with regard to potential China hegemony.

### **The Impact of American Hegemony**

Today's international system is very different from what Mackinder observed. Germany and Japan no longer pose real threats to Russia or the international system. These powers are subservient to the United States through various defense pacts and alliances after their defeat in World War II. The rimland and outer-island together form NATO which essentially challenges the Ukrainian part of the heartland. Russia is seeking to secure itself from NATO encroachment (Mearsheimer 2014). This is of course not the crux of this paper's argument nor is it Mackinder's. "Whoever can organize the heartland effectively may become the hegemon" is the core of this paper's analysis. Economic power and advanced technological innovation (advanced weaponry, weapon systems, and infrastructure) will make the vast territories easier to organize. Thus, one needs not occupy a territory to organize and ultimately control it. China is in the best position to do this given the western attempts at isolating Russia.

To place the rise of China in political context, it is important to note the Russian perspective before the fall of the Soviet Union. Having lost the Eastern



European states and witnessing the expansion of NATO, Russian leaders saw it as essential to destroy the unipolar international system, replacing it with a multipolar one. To Putin “...the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (Putin 2005). The United States presented a clear and present danger to Russia and so its hegemonic status needed to be eradicated. In other words, “balances disturbed will one day be restored” (Waltz quoted in Ikenberry 2002, 4). In the face of American encroachment on Russia’s perceived sphere of influence, President Yeltsin replaced his pro-western foreign minister with one with revisionist leanings in 1996: Evgenniy Primakov (Brzezinski 1997, 115). Primakov’s ultimate aim was to unite other counter-hegemonic powers in the international system against the United States. He was a specialist in Iran and China, with significant experience studying the Middle East. By supporting anti-American powers, it was possible to reduce the United States’ presence in Eurasia, thereby relieving Russia of a major security threat. Yeltsin’s position against the United States began to shift further into counter-hegemony and by the end of 1996, China and Russia formally stated their aim to change the international system from being “dominated by one power” (Ibid 116).

The Primakov doctrine is an effort to reform the unipolar international system into a multipolar one, Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation selected Primakov to strategize and accomplish such a goal. Primakov then developed a doctrine that follows five major tenants:

1. Russia is an indispensable actor in global politics, pursuing an independent foreign policy;
2. Russia’s foreign policy is surmised within a broad vision of a multipolar world managed by a group of nations;
3. Acceptance of Russia’s primacy in the post-Soviet space and Eurasia is fundamental to all diplomatic overtures to the nation;
4. Russia is fundamentally opposed to any expansion of NATO; and
5. Partnership with China forms a cornerstone of Russia’s foreign policy (Kanikara 2019).

To paraphrase these points, to transform the international system, Russia had to embrace an exceptional identity and return to past prestige through an alliance with China. By supporting one another, Russia and China would rise relative to the United States and Europe. Further, by opposing any expansion of NATO, Russia would maintain control of Eastern Europe thereby maintaining a sphere of influence necessary to organize the heartland. The goal of the Yeltsin administration was a multipolar international system



through a close partnership with China. This has continued until today and is best represented by the BRI. The BRI funds construction projects globally and deepens China's political influence around the world. (Freymann 2021).

Initially, there were fears that BRI would reduce Russian influence in Eurasia. However, Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine quickly tarnished relations with the West. Western sanctions led Putin to advocate for closer relations with China (Ibid 198). These relations would result in BRI projects that advanced China's grand strategy, specifically energy security through the development of oil and gas pipelines, coal mines, railways, highways, free trade zones, as well as blockchains to facilitate interconnectedness between the two states. The next section will address the impact of technological change in the organization of the Eurasian heartland, focusing on energy security infrastructure.

The impact of technological change in harnessing the heartland

The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) aims to maintain Russian influence in Eastern Europe and curb further NATO expansion. However, along with supporting China, Russia risks growing dependent on China thereby increasing the chances of a bipolar order developing, with Russia being subservient to China. China's BRI initiative already has a head-start in its pursuit of power and domination over Eurasia. Before the Russia-Ukraine War, there were seven major BRI projects in the works in Russia in 2020 alone:

- *Power of Siberia Gas Pipeline*: A 3000km natural gas pipeline costing US\$55 billion bringing in 38 billion cubic meters of gas to China each year creating US\$400 billion in revenue for Russia [China will become Russia's most important customer].
- *Mezhegey Deposit mining project*: China invested US\$1.8 billion in a coal mining project. Projected to produce 7 million tons of coal annually over 30 years.
- *The Eurasian High Speed Railway*: 772 km railway connecting China to Europe through Russia with service along the route's major cities
- *The Meridian Highway*: a route linking Tokyo to London as part of the BRI initiative, connecting the economies through highways, promoting trade and investment. Cost: US\$9 billion for the 2000 km highway.
- *The Russian Arctic Free Trade Zone*: the development of major shipping routes including roads and rail for inland access with coordination

of Russia along the Arctic circle. Establishing a free trade area along the Arctic grants China, a non-Arctic nation, access to the Arctic. Russia and China are encouraging Arctic investment by granting tax incentives and subsidies.

- *The Eurasian Economic Union*: a trade bloc between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. By integrating these markets, Russia can circumvent western sanctions. This area is important to China as a pathway into Central Asia and Europe.

- *Digital & Blockchain Technologies*: Russia-China partnership in the development of 21st-century technology including 5G networks, blockchain and cryptocurrencies, with the possibility of further spillover into other areas (Deveonshire-Ellis 2020).

Taking note, these areas feed into China's grand strategy and national security needs by circumventing access to the Pacific Ocean. First, all the above ensures that China cannot access the Pacific Ocean if there is a war with the United States over Taiwan. Second, all the above (except the last) is about access to energy (gas and coal) and transportation over land. This is essential for China considering its dependence on foreign sources for energy as well as getting goods to market. Most importantly, China relies on a particular choke point for oil and gas: The Straits of Malacca, commonly known as "China's jugular vein." This area can be easily closed by the United States and its allies (Ashraf 2017; Paszak 2021). An embargo would deal a serious blow to China. If China continues to develop pipelines through Russia, it would be able to survive any attempt at energy interruption. This is nothing new for China as for the past ten years it has been using its Myanmar pipelines to secure access to oil and gas independent of the Straits of Malacca (The Global Times July 27, 2023). Specifically, the Power of Siberia pipeline has been instrumental to Russia's war effort, having a direct connection to Russia's economic power position. Any reduction in energy purchases by the Europeans due to the war would be met by purchases by China. BRI infrastructure provided the ease of transaction during times of war. This is the significance of BRI for the Russian war effort; and China is taking full advantage of the situation.

The European Union significantly reduced Russian oil and gas imports. According to the European Union: "Petroleum oils imports from Russia fell from a monthly average of 8.7 million tonnes in the second quarter of 2022 to 1.6 million tonnes in the second quarter of this year (-82%) EU imports of natural gas dropped significantly (-17% in terms of net mass) in the second quarter of 2023, compared with the same quarter in 2022" (Eurostat September, 25 2023). European Union states are reducing their dependence on Russian oil and gas and diversifying, importing from Saudi Arabia and

the UAE (Ibid). China, conversely, is increasing its purchases significantly notwithstanding pressure from NATO member states. For instance, in June 2022, mere months after the war, China increased imports by 55% to a total of 1.98 million barrels per day (Reuters June 20, 2022). These import rates remain constant, even increasing in October 2023 to 2.01 million barrels per day (Hayley and Reuters 2023). These resources are shipped to Russia through existing pipelines, specifically the aforementioned Power of Siberia pipeline, a fundamental part of the BRI. Indeed, 20 days before the war, Russia and China signed a 30-year contract to supply gas to China (Aizhu February 4, 2022). The BRI infrastructure prepared before the war positioned Russia for a lengthened conflict due to the firm relations with China. Hence, China's imports of Russian oil and gas can be credited with its efficient use of BRI pipelines created before the war.

Despite the Russia-Ukraine War, the listed projects are still being used as an integral part of the Russia-China relationship. There have been no new BRI projects between Russia and China since the war began (Khalaf July 24, 2022). China's economy has slowed which could be the reason why there has not been any new projects. A report by the *Green Finance & Development Center* at Fudan University in Shanghai states that this is only temporary (Ibid). It is also possible that China may be shifting to another strategy, relying on existing infrastructure to consolidate investments, moving on to other issues promoting its leadership such as food security and climate change (Hawkins October 16, 2023). However, this does not mean that relations have altered. BRI infrastructure, particularly the pipelines, are being fully utilized to transport oil and gas. Still, there are major projects planned for wider Eurasia such as Russia's Eurasian Economic Union framework, Kazakhstan's Bright Road economic policy, Turkmenistan's strategy of reviving the Silk Road, and Mongolia's Steppe Road plan (Xinhua, October 10, 2023).

China's BRI is a fundamental part of China's grand strategy facilitating the peaceful rise of China. The aim is to provide funds for infrastructure construction providing loans to countries across Eurasia and the world through roads, rail, and sea (Freyman 2021, 2). China loans money to states like Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Greece, and these funds are spent on airports, pipelines, industrial parks, undersea cables, and any infrastructure that hopes to ease trade between China and the member states. These funds deepen China's relationship with the rest of the world. This program has been incredibly popular as member states seek access to Chinese markets and funds. However, it provides loans to developing states. However, oftentimes, these loans cost the state its political autonomy (Woods 2008), while other times, states take on these loans due to bribery (Naim 2007). Today, Russia

is an essential part of the BRI initiative and ultimately, it may have to depend on Chinese loans to survive the war with Ukraine, a war with no end in sight. China certainly has much to gain from the war continuing.

### Complicating Factors to China's Rise

China's hegemony is not at all inevitable. China faces internal and external threats to its survival. These threats have the power to inhibit China's power absolutely or internally, and/or externally or relatively. Internally, China's economy seems to be growing more unstable, and its political situation more tenuous. Externally, the rise of China is perceived as a security threat to neighboring states. Any alteration of the international status quo, whether the annexation of Taiwan or complete control over the South China Sea, will be met with opposition.

Internally, there are several vulnerabilities of note including demographic vulnerabilities, a slowing economy, a property market crisis, a budding debt crisis, continuing environmental and health threats along with a restless population (Meng 2023; Xi & Zhai 2023; An & Zhang 2023; Yang et al, 2023). China is also becoming more authoritarian, with many citizens facing punishment for any criticism of the CCP. The social credit score is also quite a development, creating two classes of people: those that fit the CCP mold and those who do not. The more oppressive the regime becomes, the more likely protests will grow violent. The internment of Uiygar people is also significant. If these vulnerabilities worsen, China as we know it could collapse similar to the Soviet Union. The bubble in the property market resembles the Japanese asset bubble. In the 1980s, Japan was expected to become a hegemonic competitor to the United States. However, in 1991, the country suffered an economic collapse from bubbles in asset prices and the economy has yet to recover from it (Yoshikawa 2007). China may go the way of Japan suffering from an economy that refuses to grow. Hence, there are real possibilities that China's global ambitions may not be met given the delicate domestic situation.

Externally, neighboring states may complicate China's rise as the sole Eurasian and possibly global hegemonic power. There are three major alliances that are seeking to counter China's ambition. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD: United States, Japan, India, and Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States security partnership) states, as well as other major powers like the Philippines, Vietnam, and other states with a declared interest in the

South China Sea, are seeking to counter China's ambition in the Indo-Pacific; same with the recent trilateral summit between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (Orta, August 14, 2023). Any power imbalance such as a massive relative increase in the power of China due to its control of Russia presents a major threat to relatively weaker states surrounding the Eurasian space. The QUAD and AUKUS are specific to balancing against the threat posed by China (Kassab 2023; Mouritzen 2023). Fox (2023) details the difficulties states of the first island chain experience due to China's expansionary goals. Schreer (2022) sees NATO's response to China's control of the Eurasian rimland as a threat requiring a strong response.

The more powerful China becomes, the more neighboring states will seek to balance against the threat (Walt 1985). Relatively weaker states, if they perceive little to no great power response, will bandwagon with the threat (Ibid). Major middle powers like the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, India, and Australia are militarily powerful; some of these states possess nuclear capability as well as other hardware central to containing China. Australia is an important player. As a member of the QUAD and AUKUS, it purchased a number of nuclear power submarines central to deterrence strategies (Miller and Mahdani 2023). Relatively weaker states like the Philippines are also pushing back against China's aggression in the South China Sea. These states are balancing against China with the United States. Any power imbalance is a threat to relatively weaker states. Since some states have more power than others, they will behave differently. For instance, great powers may balance against a threat, while weaker states may bandwagon with the threat. These behaviors are expected by the relative distribution of power. In other words, any relative imbalance of power will either lead less powerful states to ally themselves with others less powerful states if a more powerful state threatens the group. However, these states cannot be categorized as great powers because of this relative power differential. As the international system changes, weaker states, including middle powers, will be forced to either balance against the threat or bandwagon with the threat (Waltz 2010; Mearsheimer 2001). Some, like the United Kingdom, France, and Japan, are collaborating and enjoying productive relations with the United States and China. In other cases such as India and Australia, relations with China have collapsed. Due to their proximity to China, Australia and India are being punished for their security relations with the United States, specifically for their QUAD membership. As relative power differences between great powers widen and great power competition intensifies, middle power states may soon be forced to balance or bandwagon with either the United States or China, depending on perceptions of threat (Walt 1985). Under these circumstances,

middle powers must adapt to the new structural environment (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Kydd 2020).

It is important to note the rising opposition against China. Interestingly, Russia may also seek to throw off the yoke of China. China and Russia still have competing territorial claims like Vladivostok and Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island (Brennan 2023). Russia may see increasing dependence on China as an existential threat as a powerful China may redraw the boundaries of Eurasia, increasing its size and power and forever cementing Russia as its vassal. Before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War, this fear was certainly prevalent in the Russian government, with some fearing that BRI would be “just another attempt [by China] to steal Central Asia from us” (Freymann 2021). The West might be able to capitalize on these fears, by using territorial disputes, among other types of disagreements, to drive a wedge between China and Russia. Anything that sows mistrust between these two revisionist states will degrade China’s ability to organise Russia. More contemporarily and realistically, it seems that Russia is foregoing this concern for deeper strategic reliance on China. Yet this does not mean that the West should forgo a bait-and-bleed option, splitting the China-Russia partnership (Mearsheimer 2001).

It is difficult to ascertain whether Russia would simply accept a secondary role in the new international order in the long-run. Russia has a history of exceptionalism yet it was known to Russia that any involvement in an alliance with China would, in the long term, relegate Russia to a subordinate partner (Brzezinski 1997, 117). Brzezinski notes that China, a “...more populous, more industrious, more innovative, more dynamic, and harboring some potential territorial designs on Russia...would inevitably consign Russia to the status of a junior partner, while at the same time lacking the means to help Russia overcome its backwardness” (Ibid 117). By essentially being subordinate, China can efficiently organize Russia. This may be in the works now given the conflict with the west over Ukraine and the economic benefits of the One Belt, One Road Initiative. These two factors may be the route toward China’s organization of the heartland and the international system’s world-island.

## **Conclusion: Moving Beyond the State, Embracing Organizing Principles**

While one might argue that Putin’s “motives, aims, and intentions... [is] important, even the most powerful figures must operate within both the international structure and domestic political context” (Lobell et al 2012, 11),

it is the makeup of geography that constructs and shapes the international structure and resulting domestic political context.

While figures like Alexander Dugin express designs on the entire Eurasian geopolitical space (Sullivan et al 2020), it is clear that China will supplant that ambition. Writers like Brzezinski and Laqueur underscore the importance of the region but may not realize the significance of what Mackinder meant by *organizing*. Organizing principles are guiding ideas that bring resources and people together for a specific aim or purpose (Haugevik and Neumann 2019). If China can effectively dominate Russia through the BRI program, for instance, it will control Russia. The Ukraine War may usher in this dependence, giving China increased leverage over Russia.

If China, through BRI, enhances its ability to organize the Russian heartland, it will ultimately gain control of it without war. By expanding its territory, China will be able to access Russian resources, geopolitical space, and possibly its armed forces. This will make China the most powerful state in the international system. If Mackinder's hypothesis is correct, if China controls the heartland, it will control Europe and ultimately the world. It would leave the United States potentially isolated, as Russian armed forces may be brought to bear against Europe. While India and other players like Japan and Australia may help bring balance to the international system, the essential task will be to facilitate Russian autonomy rather than continuing to weaken it. Bringing Russia out of its present isolation might be an inhibitor of China's ability to organize the Heartland. Moving beyond the state then, scholars must remain ontologically flexible.

Mackinder sees China as more peripheral (based on a reductionist understanding of the international order) and possibly because during the time of writing, China was significantly weakened after its Century of Humiliation (19th century) and Civil War (20th century). Relatively weaker than Russia or Germany at the time, Mackinder did not see China as a major organizer, but rather Germany and then Japan. However, today is much different and China has grown in power and influence. Many of the variables that determine the importance of the World-Island remain the same, but now it is even more populous and wealthy. China will effectively be able to influence Russian foreign and military policy. Together, in the event of the planned invasion of Taiwan, the United States will be left to fight a two-front war against Russia and China, with the possibility of an aggressive Iran waiting in the wings. The war in Ukraine may essentially be the end of American hegemony and the beginning of China's.





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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Russia's current economic isolation brought on by western sanctions over the Ukraine War increases economic dependency on China. The more dependent Russia is, the more China will exercise control over it. If China were to gain complete political leverage over Russia, it would be in a position to become a global hegemon. H. J. Mackinder argues that whoever controls the heartland of the Eurasian continent controls the world's political system. This paper is unique in its approach as it updates Mackinder's thesis to today's international system incorporating trade networks as organizing principles. Military policymakers and practitioners can no longer consider China separate from Russia, but part of a symbiotic political unit forming a challenge to American hegemony. The methodology is theoretical in nature, synthesizing geopolitics with Realism and Neo-Marxism to explain the emerging international order. Such an approach is also new and innovative. As such, the United States military must prepare for the near-peer world, and understand the mechanics behind it. The emerging Anti-American axis led by China's economic power is defined by dependency networks, with Russia (and other actors like Iran) serving as its foundation.

## KEYWORDS

Geopolitics; Dependency; Russia; Mackinder; Power; Influence.

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