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The Geographical Fulcrum of the 21st Century-Revisiting the Heartland Theory

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Abstract:

In his article "The Geographical Pivot of History" (1904), H.J. Mackinder highlighted the immense significance of land power and noted that 'Who rules East Europe rules the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the world Island; and Who rules the World Island command the world'. Perceiving the world from a traditional security perspective, Mackinder highlighted the importance of land power and thus called for the acquisition of masses of land. Since then more than a century has gone by and during this period the world had undergone numerous changes in all frontiers. Today we are living in a highly globalized, interconnected and interdependent world which was hardly expected a century ago. Against this backdrop, this paper revisits the Mackinder's Heartland theory. The main objective of this study is to understand the dynamics of geopolitical trends of the 21st century and examine how relevant the Mackinder's Heartland theory is in explaining the geopolitical trends in the 21st century. The paper argues that given the dynamics of international relations in the 21st century, the geographical fulcrum of the 21st century is no longer Eurasia but Asia-Pacific. The paper brings out some of the main shortcomings of the Heartland theory which include the overemphasize on land power, underestimation of sea power and easy accessibility to trade routes and underestimation of regional and international cooperation. On the other hand, the main justifications for Asia-Pacific becoming the geographical fulcrum of 21st century include Asia's rapid economic progress (Asia's Century), possession of major sea routes, Availability of natural resources and population. The study attempts to capture the recent developments in international relations and examine how these changes determine the nature and scope of global geopolitics. This study is a desk study and data are collected through secondary sources. Considering the findings of the study, the paper argues that, 'One who holds the upper hand in Asia-Pacific shall control the destiny of the world'.

Keywords: Heartland theory, geopolitics, Asia-Pacific, geographical fulcrum, 21st century

1. Introduction

Geopolitics is by no means a new phenomenon. It goes back to the period of Thucydides and for the most part of the history; geopolitics has been a much contested and controversial subject of discussion. For Sempa (2002), "Geopolitics" is a much-overused term. As SØilen notes, the history of geopolitics is closely connected with that of the nation state (2012, p.11). According to Costachie (2011, p.275), geopolitics appears during the period when the Earth is known in its fullness, when the process of formation of national states in Europe reached its climax and when the great powers begin struggle for the division of the world, announcing the formation of colonial empires. At the outset it is important to understand what is meant by geopolitics. Cambridge Dictionary defines geopolitics as the study of the way a country's size, position, etc. influence its power and its relationships with other countries or political activity as influenced by the physical features of a country or area of the world. It is important to note that geography has always been a key aspect in the formulation of a country's foreign policy and Morgenthau (1948), Handel (1990), Hartmann (1978) and Mingst & Arreguin (2011) identified geography as a key element of national power.

Over the last two centuries or so, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars and professionals belong to various fields; put forth various theories and concepts to understand the dynamics of geopolitics prevailing at that point of time. Among those theorists, Rudolf Kjellen, Halford Mackinder, Nicolas Spykman, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Friedrich Ratzel occupy a prominent place. The theories and concepts put forth by each of these theorists have both similarities as well as contradictions. For instance, in his work 'Influence of sea power upon History 1660-1789' (1890) Mahan underscores the importance of sea power. However, in contrast, Mackinder in his Heartland theory (1904) emphasized the importance of land power. Later, building on both the sea power theory of Mahan and Heartland theory of Mackinder, Spykman put forth the Rimland theory to explain the dynamics of geopolitics. Thus, each theory is unique and has been useful in explaining the geopolitical dynamics existed during certain periods of the history.

Against this backdrop, this particular study revisits the Heartland theory of Mackinder (1904, 1919). In brief, Mackinder in this Heartland theory has highlighted the importance of land power. The core argument of Mackinder can be given as follows.

- Who rules East Europe rules the Heartland;
- Who rules the Heartland commands the world Island;
- Who rules the World Island command the world.

This idea of Mackinder proved to be relevant and received greater prominence, particular after the Second World War. The Heartland theory reflected the Soviet Union's emergence as a super power after the Second World War.

However, this paper challenges the Heartland theory of Mackinder as it doesn't capture geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century. Since Mackinder first put forth his idea, a century has gone by, and over the past century, the world has undergone a number significant changes, particular in terms of the structure of the international system. Since 1904, the world had two World Wars, Cold War rivalry between the USA and Soviet Union, downfall of the Soviet Union, establishment of the United Nations and the emergence of regional powers and regional organizations and many more incidents which changed the nature and direction of international relations. On top of everything, today we are living in a highly globalized world where no country can remain isolated. The study emphasizes on the following limitations of the Mackinder's Heartland theory in defining the "Heartland".

- Over reliance on land power
- Underestimation of sea power.
- Underestimation of economic cooperation
- Underestimation of regional cooperation

Against this backdrop, the study proposes that the fulcrum of geopolitics has shifted from Eurasia to Asia Pacific. The core arguments for this proposition can be given as follows.

- Rapid Economic progress (Asia's century)
- Possession of major sea routes
- Availability of natural resources
- Population (Market)

Here it has to be noted that this paper doesn't completely reject the ideas put forth by Mackinder. Instead it attempts to explain how the changes which have been taking place in the international arena shifted the geopolitical center from Eurasia to Asia-Pacific. The study looks at these dynamics from an economic perspective. Today we are living in a world where a country's power is not determined solely by how many territories it possesses. Instead, it all comes down to the fact, how strong you are economically.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To critically evaluate the contemporary relevance of the Heartland theory of H.J. Mackinder.
- To understand the dynamics of global geopolitics.

1.2. Research Questions

- What is the contemporary relevance of the Heartland theory of H.J. Mackinder?
- How have these dynamics in international relations have affected global geopolitics of the 21st century?

2. Methodology

This study is a desk research based on secondary data obtained from books, general articles, web articles, annual reports etc. This study looks into the dynamics and developments of international geopolitics by looking into various information and statistics such as population, economic growth rates, possession of natural resources etc. with special focus on Asia-Pacific.

3. Literature Review

For many centuries, geopolitics has been a highly contested and controversial subject. According to Sempa (2002, p.03) 'Geopolitics' is a much-over used term. However, despite it has been a highly contested area of concern, there is no consensus among scholars over defining the term geopolitics. The Cambridge Dictionary defines geopolitics as the study of the way a country's size, population, etc. influence its power and its relationships with other countries, or political activity as influenced by the physical features of a country or area of the world. As per Tovy (2015), geopolitics is the connection between geography and the formation and management of the foreign policy of a certain state or as the geographical influence on the conduct of foreign policy which includes a complex mixture of territorial interrelationships, power and confrontation among political and national units. For Costachie (2011, p.264), geopolitics is a theory-oriented research which reveals the relationship of substance between the geographical position of a state and its policy. As per him, geopolitics appears during the period when the Earth is known in its fullness, when process of formation of national states in Europe reached its climax and when the great powers begin struggle for division of the world, announcing the formation of colonial empires (ibid,

p.275). Sempa brings out one of the key aspects in the study of geopolitics, where he says, geopolitics is about perspective. It is about how one view the world (2002, p.04).

Over the last two centuries, particularly during the late 1880s and early 1900s, a number of scholars put forth various theories and concepts to understand the dynamics of geopolitics prevailed during certain periods of the history. Among those, the sea power theory of Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890), organic state theory of Friedrich Ratzel, Heartland theory of Halford Mackinder (1904, 1919) and Rimland theory of Nicolas Spykman occupy a prominent place. Each theory remains significant as they attempt to capture various geopolitical developments existed during different time periods of the history. For instance, Mahan is the first to present naval history against the broad canvas of historical events and political and economic interrelationships within the framework of the hegemonic struggle among the powers during the modern era (Tovy, 2015, p.13). Mahan went on to establish a sort of logical syllogism that described the relationship between a nation's economic prospects, its maritime trade and its navy (Rubel, 2012, p.02). However, in 1904, contradicting the idea of Mahan, Halford Mackinder came up with a theory which highlighted the strength of land power. Mackinder remains a key figure in the development of geography as an academic discipline in Britain (Ashworth, 2010, p.285). Mackinder interpreted the world historical process based on the idea that the world was inherently divided into isolated areas each of which had a specific function to perform (Ismailov&Papava, 2010, p.84). Expressing a similar view, Tovy notes that;

"Mackinder perceived the world as a large and uniform block comprising the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. He calls this bloc the 'world island', with a pivot area extending over the continents of Asia and Europe, or Eurasia" (2015, p.11). In Mackinder's words, the Heartland includes the Baltic sea, the navigable Middle and Lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet and Mongolia (1919, p.141). As he notes, the Heartland is the region to which, sea power can be refused access (ibid). According to Ashworth (2010, p.289), Mackinder's geopolitics left the sea power in a precarious position. However, with the passage of time, different theories and concepts came up challenging the Heartland theory of Mackinder. For instance, in 1942, Nicolas Spykman proposed a theory which countered Mackinder's Heartland theory. Spykman stated that Eurasia's Rimland, the coastal area or buffer zone, is the key to controlling the world island, not the heartland (Baoluo, 2016). Accordingly, his formula was whoever rules the Rimland, commands Eurasia, and whoever rules Eurasia commands the world (Ismailov & Papava, 2010, p.89). A summary of the main theories and concepts of geopolitics can be given as follows (Table 01).

Name of the Theorist	Period	Key Ideas
Friedrich Ratzel	1844-1904	Organic theory of state evolution States, as organisms go through stages of growth and decay. Just as an organism requires food, so the state needs space. Any state, to retain its vigor and to continue to thrive, must have space in increasing quantity.
Samuel Van Valkenburg	1890-1976	Cycle theory of the development of states Proposed four stages of state development namely; youth, adolescence, maturity and old age. In each stage, state exhibits certain characteristics which will be reflected in their external relationships
Rudolf Kjellen	1864-1922	First to coin the term "Geopolitics". Elaborated on Ratzel's organic theory. He saw the state in a constant competition with other states; larger states would extend their power over small ones, and ultimately the world would have only a few very large and extremely powerful states.

*Table 1: Highlights of Major Geopolitical Theories/Concepts.
Source: Created by Author Based on De Blij, H. J. (1973). Systematic Political Geography (Vol. 2). USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc*

4. Key Findings and Discussion

As explained before, the central idea of Mackinder's Heartland theory was land power. As shown in the Figure 01, he underscored the importance of acquisition of masses of lands.

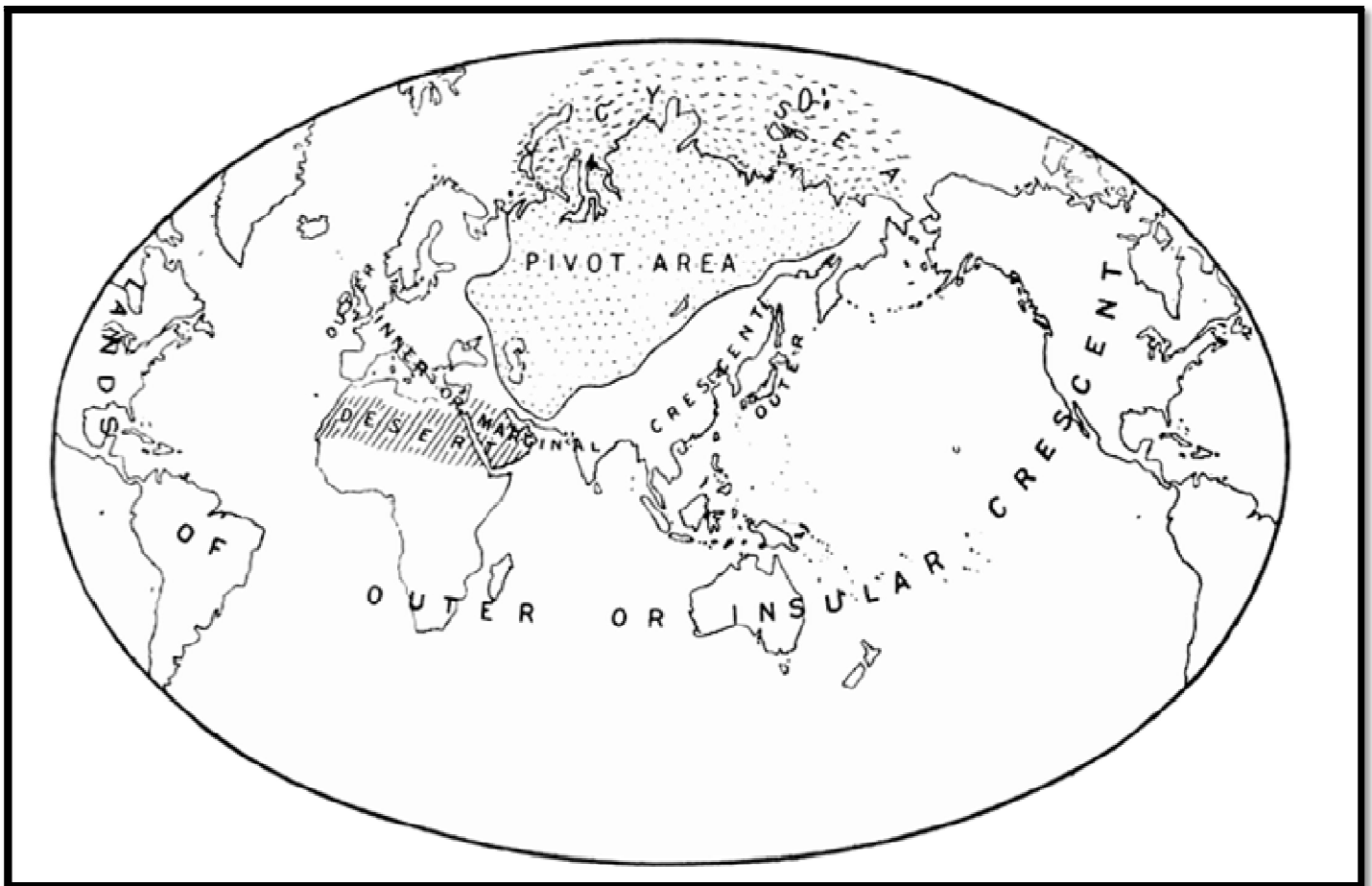


Figure 1: Mackinder's Heartland Theory

Source: Mackinder, H. J. (1904), *the Geographical Pivot of History*, *the Geographical Journal*, 170(4), 298-321, Retrieved May 24, 2018, from https://www.lwp.edu/doclib/20131016_Mackinderthegeographicaljournal.pdf

As Mackinder notes, who rules East Europe rules the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the world Island; and who rules the World Island command the world. His main argument was possession of the pivot area gives access to natural resources and that pivot area is secured from any vulnerability from the sea. For him, possession of masses of land is an essential prerequisite to develop from military force. This concept gained lot of prominence by the mid-1900s, as it rightly explained the rise of the Soviet Union. However, since then a century has gone and over the last century, the world underwent massive changes. Some of these changes were hardly expected during that time. Looking at his theory, it should be highlighted that, he perceived the world from a traditional security perspective. For instance, according to him, a state is vulnerable, if it can be easily reached via sea routes. In other words, according to him, a country's close proximity to coastal lines makes that country vulnerable to external attacks. As a whole, the Mackinder's Heartland theory possess two main weaknesses.

- Over emphasize on land power and underestimation of sea power.
- Underestimation of international and regional cooperation.

4.1. Over Emphasize On Land Power and Underestimation of Sea Power

As mentioned before, Mackinder's Heartland theory emphasize very much on the land power. As Mackinder himself notes, the Heartland is the region to which, under modern conditions, sea power can be refused to access (Mackinder, 1919, p.141). According to Mackinder, sea power was always weaker than land power because land power had two strategies for overcoming its sea borne foes. A land power could either conquer all the bases of sea power, thus creating an internal sea under its control (e.g. Macedonia, Rome); or it could conquer a greater resource base that possessed by the sea power, and then use this base to build a fleet to confront the sea power (Dorian Greeks, Sparta) (Ashworth, 2010, p.287). Ashworth also notes that Mackinder's geopolitics left the sea powers in a precarious position (ibid, p.289). One major reason behind Mackinder's emphasize on land power was the emergence and development of transcontinental railways. However, pointing out that weakness, Spykman, in his Rimland theory highlighted the importance of coastal lines. Looking at contemporary geopolitics, sea power has gained greater prominence in shaping the nature and scope of international relations. As De Blij (1973, p.220) notes, the oceans which at one time isolated peoples whose technology was not advanced sufficiently far to

traverse them, ultimately become the routes to power and eminence for many modern states. Here it should be noted that, sea power doesn't necessarily mean the number of warships a country possesses. Today sea routes play a major role in international trade, which has not been captured by Mackinder. According to the International Chamber of Shipping (2017), shipping is the life blood of global economy. Without shipping, intercontinental trade, the bulk transport of raw materials, and the import/export of affordable food and manufactured goods would simply not be possible. As per the International Maritime Organization (IMO), maritime transport is essential to the world's economy as over 90% of the world's trade is carried by sea and it is, by far, the most cost-effective way to move en masse goods and raw materials around the world. Furthermore, with the improvement in air power, the importance of land power has been diminished significantly. Thus, today, authority over land doesn't necessarily make you less vulnerable in a situation of warfare as well.

4.2. Underestimation of International and Regional Cooperation

In his Heartland theory, though he notes that one who rules the Eurasia commands the rest of the world, he doesn't explain how it is done. He puts so much weight on traditional military aspect as a mean of conquering territories. However, today we are living in a world where no state can attain its national interests via traditional military approaches. As liberals point out, today we are living in a world where countries pursue many interests. Today, economic interests have become more important to states than just increasing the military capacity. In a highly interconnected globalized world, no country can attain its interests, particularly economic interests alone. That is where cooperation becomes so pivotal. Today, cooperation among states have become inevitable. No country in this world is self-sufficient and can remain isolated. International trade, investment and other economic interactions among states are increasing every year. Today, there are various forms of regional and international organizations created for different purposes and most of these international and regional set ups have proved to be fruitful. Coming to the main argument of the paper, this particular study argues that the fulcrum of international politics is no longer Eurasia but Asia Pacific (Figure 02).



Figure 2: The Fulcrum of 21st Century Geopolitics

Source: *Asia-Pacific Cost of Living Rankings for April 2012*. (2012, June 06). Retrieved June 5, 2018, from <https://Internationalcostofliving.Com/2012/06/06/Asia-Pacific-Cost-Of-Living-Rankings- for-April-2012/>

However, this paper doesn't completely reject all the ideas put forth by Mackinder. For instance, this paper also highlights the importance of possession of natural resources as a major aspect if any region to become the pivot in international geopolitics. The main justifications for Asia-Pacific to become the fulcrum of international geopolitics can be given as follows.

- Rapid Economic progress (Asia's century)

- Availability of natural resources
- Possession of major sea routes
- Population (Market)

4.3. Rapid Economic Progress (Asia's Century)

The Asian Development Bank in its report ASIA 2050: Realizing the Asian Century notes that, Asia is in the midst of a truly historic transformation. If it continues to grow on its recent trajectory, it could by 2050, account for more than half of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), trade and investment, and enjoy widespread affluence (ADB, 2011, P.01). Today, Asia – Pacific region is on the rise. Particularly from an economic perspective, the rise of Asia-Pacific is inevitable.

	GDP Growth rate % 2018
Central Asia	3.9
East Asia	5.8
South Asia	7.0
Southeast Asia	5.1
The Pacific	3.2
United States	2.4
Euro Area	1.8

Table 2: GDP Growth Rate Forecast-2018

Source: ADB. (2017). *Asian Development Outlook Update 2017 (Rep.)*, Asian Development Bank, Retrieved June4, 2018, from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/365701/ado2017-update.pdf>

Given its large population, availability of natural resources and rapid improvement in technology, Asia becoming the economic powerhouse is only a matter of time. As given in Table 02, Asian economies are projected to grow faster than the developed economies in the coming years. For instance, when Euro area is projected to grow 1.8%, South Asia and Southeast Asian economies are projected to grow by 7.0% and 5.1% respectively.

4.4. Availability of Natural Resources

Irrespective of the century you are living, natural resources have always been a key element of national power. That is one major reason for Mackinder's Heartland theory as well. Acknowledging that stance, this paper also highlights the importance of natural resources. When it comes natural resources, most of the natural resources are found in Asia-Pacific region. As given in Table 03, Asian countries lead when it comes to the production and export of major resources such as steel, iron ore and coal.

No	Steel Producers	
01	China	50
02	Japan	6
03	India	6
04	United States	5
05	Russian federation	4
	Iron ore exporters	
01	Australia	57
02	Brazil	26
03	South Africa	5
04	Canada	3
05	Sweden	2

Table 3: Main Producers and Exporters of Steel, Iron Ore and Coal- 2016 (Percentage)

Source: UNCTAD. (2017), *Review of Maritime Transport 2017 (Publication No. UNCTAD/RMT/2017)*, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Doi: ISSN 0566- 7682

As given in Table 03, Asia remains the main producers and exporters of a number of key resources and raw materials with a greater industrial value. For instance, more than 50% of steel, Iron ore and coal are being produced or exported in Asia-Pacific region. From an industrial point of view, coal is widely used for coal generation, steel production and cement manufacturing etc. Apart from the above mentioned, Asia-Pacific region is also home for a number of mineral resources which includes bauxite, coal, cobalt, copper, diamond, gold, iron ore, lead, lithium, manganese, mineral sands, tantalum, uranium, antimony, arsenic, barite, fluorite, graphite, rare earths, strontium, tin, tungsten, and zinc etc.

4.5. Possession of Major Sea Routes

As mentioned earlier, much of the international trade is being carried out via sea routes. According to UNCTAD (2017), world seaborne trade expanded by 2.6% in 2016, up from 1.8% in 2015. This growth is better illustrated in the Figure 3.

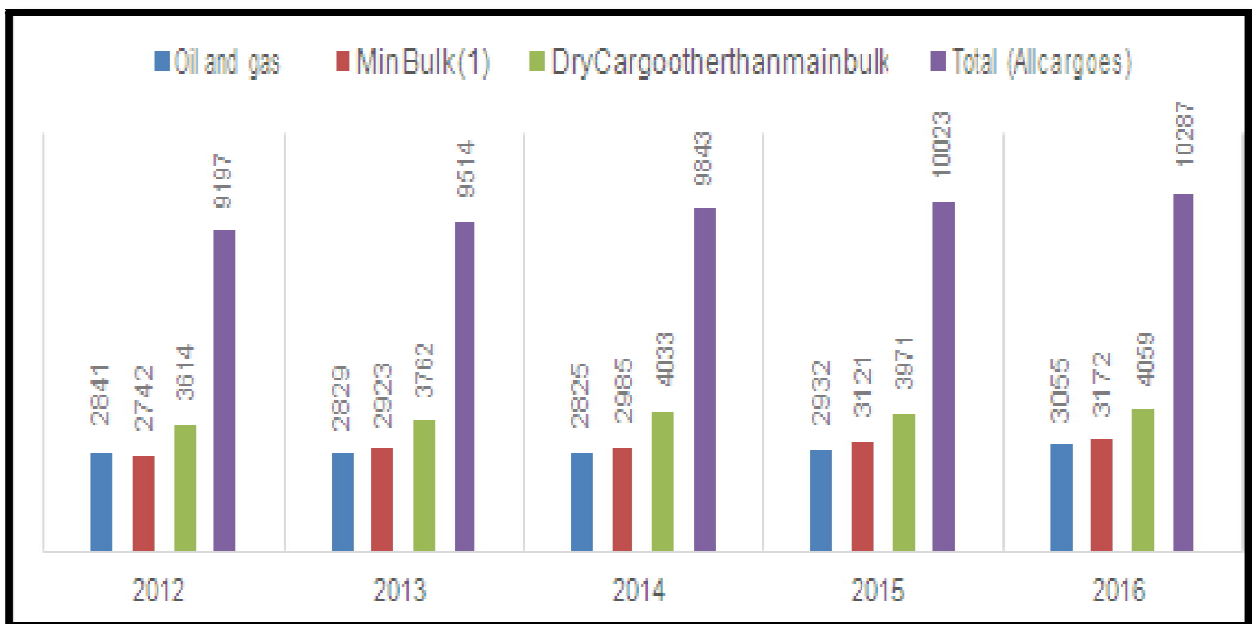


Figure 3: Growth in International Seaborne Trade 2012-2016 (Million Tons Loaded)

Source: UNCTAD. (2017), *Review of Maritime Transport 2017* (Publication No. UNCTAD/RMT/2017), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Doi: ISSN 0566- 7682

- Iron ore, grain, coal, bauxite, Alumina and phosphate rock

As given in the Figure 3, there is a clear and continuous increase in the seaborne trade with regard to all products. Here, the trade routes in Asia come to the limelight, as the vast majority of the trade is being done with the Asia and Pacific. As mentioned in Table 02, Asia remains the key producer and exporter of many of the resources with greater industrial value, which means Asia remains a vital center for international trade. On the other hand, Asia-Pacific is also the main importer of these resources (Table 04).

No	Steel Users	
01	China	45
02	United States	06
03	India	06
04	Japan	04
04	Republic of Korea	04
	Iron ore import	
01	China	71
02	Japan	9
03	Europe	7
04	Republic of Korea	5
05	Other	8
	Coal importers	
01	China	18
02	India	17
03	Japan	16
04	Europe	12
05	Republic of Korea	11

Table 4: Main User/ Importers of Steel, Iron Ore and Coal- 2016 (Percentage)

Source: UNCTAD. (2017). *Review of Maritime Transport 2017* (Publication No. UNCTAD/RMT/2017), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Doi: ISSN 0566- 7682

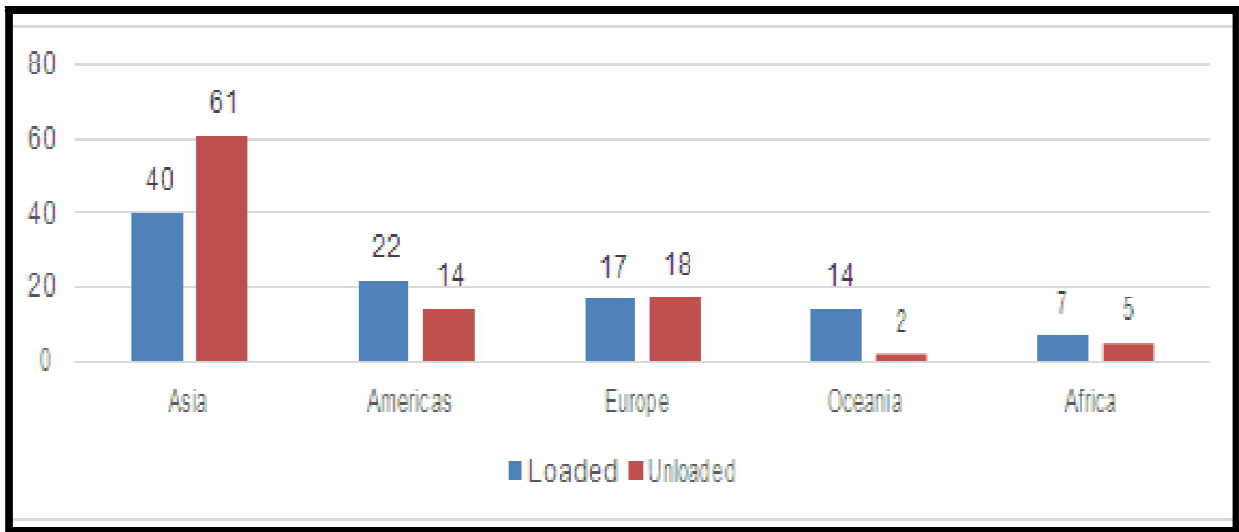


Figure 4: World Seaborne Trade, by Region, 2016 (Percentage Share in the World Tonnage)
 Source: UNCTAD. (2017), Review of Maritime Transport 2017 (Publication No. UNCTAD/RMT/2017), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Doi: ISSN 0566- 7682

Looking at the Table 04, it is clear that like the production and export, Asia remain a key importer of these resources. These trends have obviously made the region such a pivotal region of maritime trade routes (Figure 4). With the initiation of the Belt and Road initiative by China, these sea routes in the Asia-Pacific region have got greater prominence and continue to be a pivotal center in international trade (Figure 05).

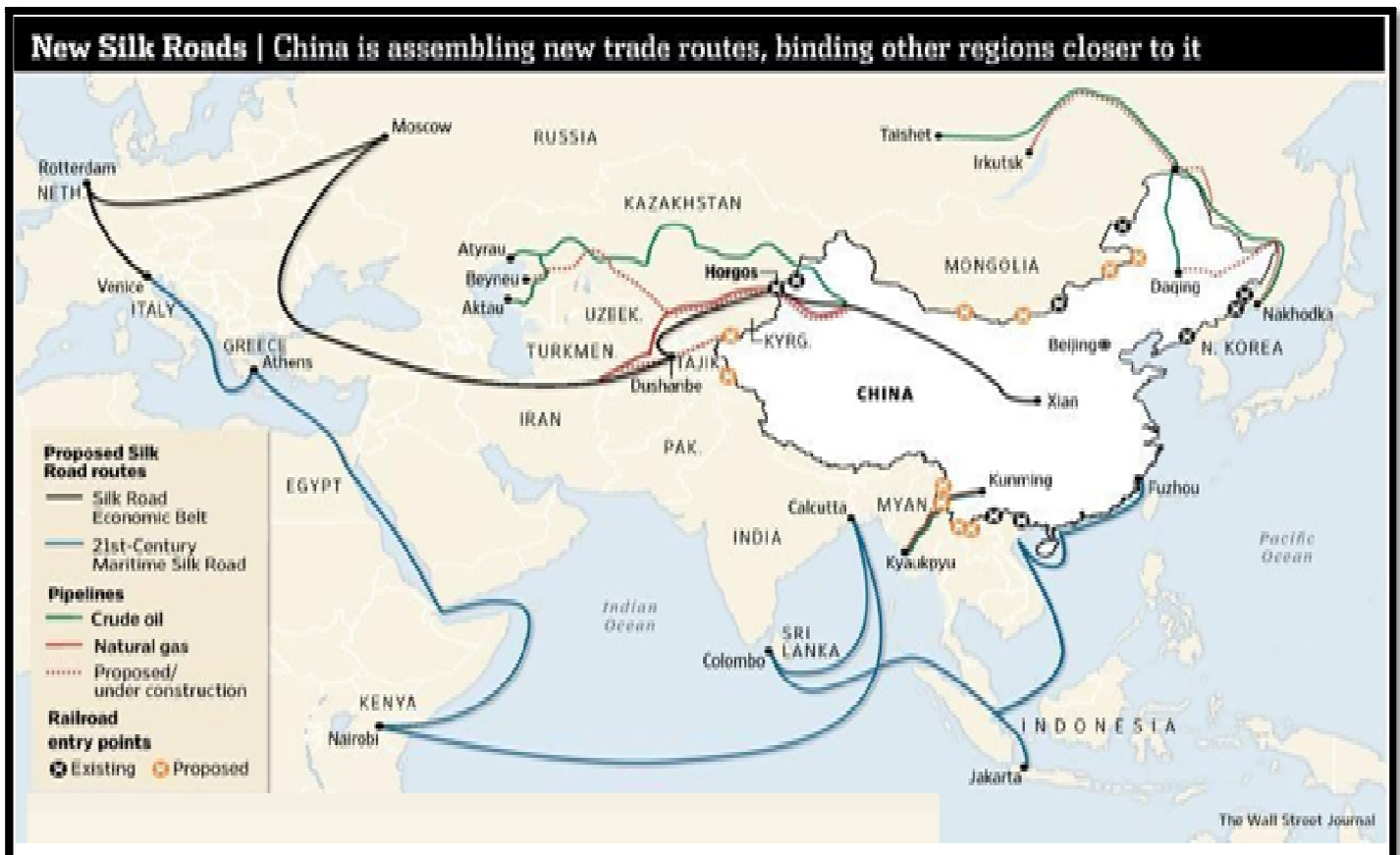


Figure 5: New Silk Route
 Source: Marácz, F. (2017, December 15). Figure s of the Silk Road, Retrieved June 5, 2018, from <http://Beltandroadcenter.Org/2017/12/15/Figure s-of-the-Silk-Road/>

4.6. Population

Population has always remained a key element of national power for many reasons such as labour force, military, market etc. Despite we are living in the 21st century, the importance of population has not faded away. Instead it has gained more prominence. When it comes to the current international arena, countries with larger populations are having a larger say (ex. China, India). Looking at the top 10 most populous countries, the majority is from the Asia Pacific region.

Rank	Country	Population
01	China	1,379,302,771
02	India	1,281,935,911
03	United States of America	326,625,791
04	Indonesia	260,580,739
05	Brazil	207,353,391
06	Pakistan	204,924,861
07	Nigeria	190,632,261
08	Bangladesh	157,826,578
09	Russia	142,257,519
10	Japan	126,451,398

Table 5: Top 10 Countries with the Largest Population (July 2017)

Source: Country Comparison: Population. (N.D.). Retrieved June 5, 2018, from

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html>

Looking at the above Table 05, out of the top 10 most populous countries in the world, 6 are from the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, in terms of the population also Asia-Pacific is far ahead of other regions. From an economic perspective, population remains a key aspect of economic growth and development. It provides a country with abundance of labour and market. One major reason for the massive amounts of investments to countries like China and India has been the population. This population becomes more important as the Asian middle-class population is expected to rise sharply over the coming years (Table 05).

	2030			2050		
	Middle Class Population	Upper Class Population	GDP per capita (PPP)	Middle Class Population	Upper Class Population	GDP per capita (PPP)
China	1,120	40	21,100	1,240	190	47,800
India	1,190	15	13,200	1,400	210	41,700
Indonesia	220	5	13,500	250	40	37,400
Japan	100	20	48,900	60	40	66,700
Republic of Korea	30	20	60,200	10	35	107,600

Table 6: Rising Middle Class in Asia

Source: ASIA 2050: Realizing the Asian Century (Publication). (2011)

Asian Development Bank. Retrieved December 13, 2017, from

<http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/18867/48263622.pdf?sequence=1>

As given in the above Table 06, the middle class and upper-class cluster of population in many of the Asian countries will increase significantly. This is a clear indicator of the emerging Asia. Years back, the population in Asia was perceived only in terms of labour. However, now Asia is being viewed as an effective market for all kind of goods and services.

5. Conclusion

While acknowledging Mackinder's view on geopolitical trends, it is clear that over the last century, the nature and scope of international relations have changed drastically and the Eurasia which he perceived as the Heartland is no longer the pivot area of world politics. Today, the world cannot be viewed from a pure traditional security perspective. A holistic approach is needed to understand the new trends in 21st century geopolitics. This paper is an attempt to explain these changes. As mentioned, while some of the points brought out by Mackinder is still relevant, his main argument of considering Eurasia as the Heartland is debatable. Looking at the changes which have been taking place in the world over the last century, especially in the 21st century, it is clear that Asia has now become the fulcrum of global geopolitics. As mentioned earlier, today, all the developments in the international area is perceived from an economic perspective. Thus, in understanding the

developments in the international arena, it is important to underscore the importance of economic developments. Considering these developments, it is clear that the fulcrum of geopolitics is no longer Eurasia but Asia-Pacific. Considering the geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century it can be summarized that, "one who holds the upper hand in Asia-Pacific shall control the destiny of the world".

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