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A BOOK REVIEW OF THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PEACE

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Author: Nicholas John Spykman (posthumously
edited by Helen R. Nicholl)

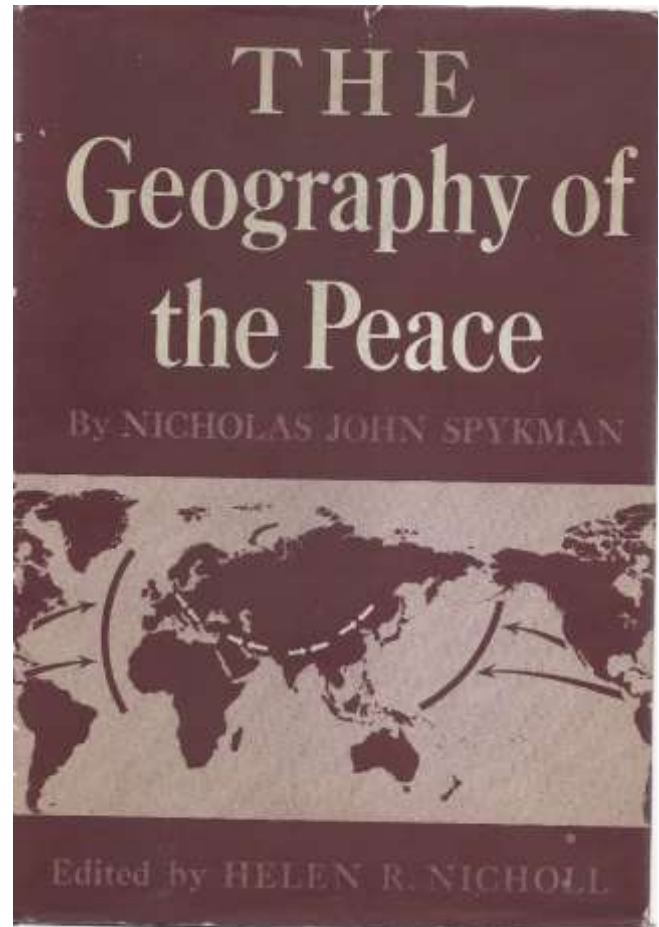
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ABSTRACT

This book review dissects the 1944 posthumous work of American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman entitled *The Geography of the Peace*. Setting an optimistic view of the end of the Second World War, Spykman sparked renewed interest in reformulating the prevailing geopolitical formula by revisiting and critiquing Sir Harold Mackinder's Heartland Theory, which was proven outdated and idealistic upon the onset of the war. To correct these oversights, Spykman proposed a more pragmatic and all-encompassing approach in geopolitical interactions by recalibrating Mackinder's theory by integrating a more littoral-oriented area, termed the "rimland," and introducing air power into the nexus of fundamental geopolitical factors, which provided a more all-encompassing viewpoint needed to expound on immediate geopolitical and defense analysis. The book, on the other hand, has suffered from methodological and conceptual flaws, as well as authorial questioning, which casts a cloud of doubt over the veracity of the presented information. Ultimately, Spykman's book presented a quality of healthy skepticism and interrogation of the insularity of both the United States of America and its European counterparts to a certain extent when it comes to girdling geopolitics and global collective security. It places the question of intention and forthrightness at the heart of the present-day analysis of post-war American foreign policy, apropos of the national sovereignty of nations within the Asian, African, and Latin American regions.

Keywords: Geopolitics, International Relations, Rimland, Nicholas John Spykman, United States Foreign Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

"The policy of all the powers is in their geography." This is the famed dictum that is largely attributed, albeit unofficially, to Napoleon Bonaparte. This belief was based on the idea that geography serves as a litmus test for the venerable hypothesis about the "political bridegroom," which involves defining, measuring, and acting for national interest and security in relation to geographical conditions. Furthermore, marshaling the area-specific expertise of international security by way of geography, one must chart a treacherous course of geographical concepts to consummate a holistic and impartial understanding of the nexus of geopolitics and international security. After all, geography is not only the "eyes of history," but it is also the poisonous pill that scholars and researchers alike of that particular time period and even up to the 21st century find it easy to discredit or to reconcile the place of security and national interests in terms of historical interpretation.

Thus, in 1944, in an attempt to oppugn the famous and idealist concept of Sir Harold Mackinder in that of the “Heartland” principle, Nicholas John Spykman, in his posthumous work entitled *The Geography of the Peace*, responded by attempting to accord the “place of geopolitical analysis in the formulation of a security policy.” At that time, geopolitics was either ill-defined by academics whose rival schools of thought tended to monopolize it, or it served as a platform for the “idealist, morally dogmatic liberals” to give credibility to their stances about “world peace,” or it was treated as a lowly servant by policymakers of foreign policy development (Spykman 1944, pp. x, 3). The purpose, then, of this book is not only to read the geopolitical transitions happening in the 1940s that crucially address the capricious state of the policies followed by major international powers, which were undermined by the Second World War, but also to further justify the idea that the international security problem born of the war will be and must be shouldered by the Americans to deter opposing nations (Spykman 1944, p. x).

II. SUMMARY

Considered by contemporaneous peers as the sequel to Spykman’s earlier work entitled *America’s Strategy in World Politics* published in 1942, the book is divided into five parts, which take into account the very nature and stimulus of the relationship between geography and foreign policy, which then emerges as a perspicacious component of understanding the West’s diplomatic approach in the Eurasian geopolitical region. As history has shown, the Eurasian region served as the crucible of the developing system of ideological geopolitics, emerging as the ideological frontline of the Cold War between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The first and shortest chapter, entitled “Geography in War and Peace,” deals with the sobering reality that the world of that time was facing: the ‘tremendous struggle’ of the major nations for political power (Spykman 1944, p. 3). Using the war as a judicious and necessary backdrop, Spykman argues that nations that become embroiled were either to defend their territory—an encroachment upon which ‘threatens the very life of [the state]’—or to augment their political prestige, anchored by the leverage such power affords (Spykman 1944, p. 4). Thus, to prevent future wars for political supremacy, Spykman offered a prudent and revolutionary, albeit pragmatic, solution, and that is by creating a system of “collective security.” Each state will retain its own armed forces but will accept an obligation to fight in the defense of any other state whose security is threatened, and upon accomplishment of such, the feeling of collective security is embedded (Spykman 1944, p. 4).

In the eyes of a 21st-century reader, the echoes of Spykman’s daring statement are very much reverberating in the present, as it manifested in the form of the United Nations, created a year after this book was published. Much like how the United Nations of the present works, Spykman argued that it is important to understand that these ‘major nations,’ which have the inherent military strength to defend themselves, will be the enforcers and policers of the yearned-for collective security. This alternative was given more emphasis by Spykman compared to the alternative of abandoning power politics for mutual

and harmonious state cooperation or creating a superstate that operates with wide police force power in the hopes of dissuading nations from the need for (re)armament.

The second chapter deals with the problem of mapmaking, as there are technical and cartographical differences between the types of map projections used by geographers, historians, political scientists, and foreign policymakers in societal analysis. In conjunction with that, Spykman assails the influence of the Mercator projection map as he advocates for a “complete scrapping” of such, since the map is not furnished with a proportional areal representation of the nation-states as areas near the Northern Pole tend to have a bigger land area than their original – emblematically projecting political power. Thus, with the introduction of the Miller cylindrical map projection by 1942, it attempts to reverse the usual optic as it views not the entire Northern Hemisphere, but rather, the Western Hemisphere as the fundamental nexus of geopolitical power in the world, as it projects the ‘United States’ in the center of the Old and New World (Spykman 1944, p. 18). Beyond the usual cartographical precedents, Spykman implicitly argued that with the imminent rise of air power, the conduct of the old intellectual norm of “terrestrial-and-aquatic only” geographic frontiers will be proven ineffectual and archaic by the technological advancements and unpalatable to the future generation of researchers and scholars (Spykman 1944, p. 17).

The third and fourth chapters, which comprise the meaty bulk of the book, represent a diptych approach: The influence of the rimland (areas that are within and surrounded by marginal and mediterranean seas that constitute a maritime highway, which in turn connects the economic and political security of the nations within) in the geopolitical idea of security is immeasurable, as Spykman has argued: “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world,” while addressing the dilemma of “encirclement” and “isolationism” that tends to restrain how a nation views itself in relation to others, much like how the United States of America worked before the Second World War (Spykman 1944, pp. 19, 44). Accordingly, nations within the rimland (areas including present-day China, the entire Southeast Asian region, Japan, the Indian subcontinent, and the Western Asian region) are primarily the nations that have adequate resources of men and materials that can exercise a direct influence on the peaceful organization of international society. On the other hand, the nations who are lacking in either of the two resources or both of them often resort to ‘isolationism,’ which is an understandable act to do but would often lead to encirclement by much stronger nations.

The concluding chapter, “The Strategy of Security,” envisioned a world in which the United States is at the forefront without the predominance of hegemonic powers whose “principles and ideals are opposed to the whole course of Western civilization” (Spykman 1944, p. 45). In doing such a colossal task, Spykman argues, it is necessary for the United States not only to avoid becoming over-reliant on naval and land power but also to incorporate a formidable and systematic air power that could stretch across ‘maritime zones.’ In addition, it is to be understood that to ensure the stability of what Spykman defined as power-based ‘collective security,’ the United States must treat Great Britain (while seen as a dwindling major power at that time) as its transatlantic zone ally and, intriguingly, the Soviet Union as its major partner in enforcing peace in the Eurasian mainland (Spykman 1944, p. 57). After all, the strength

of Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States must be readily available to preserve the power balance.

In the end, Spykman intriguingly advocates for a utopian superstate envisioning “achieving the organization of a world state and abolishing the independent sovereignty of nations” (Spykman 1944, p. 60). But as long as the realistic political, economic, and military conditions of the entire world do not permit the redefinition of world power balance and international relations, Spykman asserted a core thesis: the United States is the major political power that is committed to enforcing “collective security,” and it is within the interest of the Americans to sincerely request mutual cooperation with the British and Russians for constant regulation of geopolitical interests within both the “Heartland” and “Rimland” regions. Anyhow, Spykman noted, “their cooperation will serve their own best interests” (Spykman 1944, p. 61).

III. ANALYSIS

As we assess, or reassess, the strength of Spykman’s work, one has to be reminded of the fact that it was originally written in 1943 and published the next year. One of its conspicuous strengths was Spykman’s straightforward and uncomplicated explanation of geographical and geopolitical terms. Given that the topic being discussed by Spykman was a complex and intellectually challenging one, there were technical jargons present in his book (such as azimuth, Heartland, Rimland, and many other related terminologies) that the reader had to confront, and yet Spykman took up the mantle of simplification, which helped lay the smooth conveyance of his ideas.

Another strength of Spykman’s work was his refinement (or revision, to a certain extent) of the precedent set by Sir Halford Mackinder in the Heartland Theory. After four decades of the pervasiveness of Mackinder’s Heartland Theory, upon the publication of his 1904 work entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History,” Spykman, confronted with a variegated geopolitical framework compared to that of Mackinder’s times and disillusionment with the idealist construct of the Heartland Theory, offered a more realistic and pragmatic approach by formulating the Rimland Theory, as seen in this book. His theory, while anticipating the rise of independent centers of power such as China, India, and Japan that could antagonize the position of Mackinder’s Heartland, provided the necessary theoretical underpinning for the United States in terms of exploration of the extent of American foreign policies, starting from the 1950s up until the 21st century. It eventually became an act of leveraging economic, political, and technological facets against areas within Spykman’s rimland (Gerace 1991, p. 349, 353). It also became the concealed engine behind the United States’ act of containment against the rising influence of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology. It provided a defensible excuse for the Americans to use an aggressive method of curbing and preventing the spread of Communist ideology through coercive intrusion into the national sovereignty of other nations—a strategy that became the hallmark of American foreign policy during the Cold War.

If the strengths of this book are well-articulated, so too are its shortcomings. As earlier stated, this work is a memento of the intellectual prodigiousness of Spykman, which was published in 1944, at the latter stage of the Second World War. Thus, a fundamental contradiction or shortcoming of this book is not the year it was written, but rather the authorial authenticity and factual association of the information presented in the book. When read closely, Frederick Sherwood Dunn's introduction explicitly stated that Spykman, with the intent of making use of his lecture's stenographic records in coming up with the book, suddenly died in June 1943 (Spykman 1944, p. x). Eventually, the fulfillment was made by Helen Nicholls, Spykman's chief researcher and assistant, with "real fidelity" to the plan and intentions of his departed master (Spykman 1944, p. x).

As the book reviewer, I think there is a cloud of doubt covering the book on the exact degree or extent of the 'fidelity' of Nicholls' writing, which embodied Spykman's ideas. There is a high certainty, without being prejudicial to Nicholls' intellectual capacity and fidelity, that the words the readers are reading are actually Nicholls' interpretation of the concepts espoused by Spykman, not Spykman *himself*. In addition, the use of Spykman's lecture stenographic records alone is a reminder to both laymen and educated readers that such referential material is not a thorough and complete source that can be utilized in discussing a rather sophisticated topic. As with any historical or other academic references, source criticism is a must to ensure 'real fidelity' of the information being presented.

Another shortcoming of Spykman was his inferential core thesis that collective security is deeply entrenched and heavily dependent on the mutual cooperation of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, who were wartime allies, by 1943. Spykman has elided the dynamic and sometimes violent clash of perspectives with respect to national interests and ideological nationalism, which subsequently manifested in the form of predatory and malign nation-states. Historical accounts have shown that after the Second World War, both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in maligning and transgressing Spykman's calculated vision of collective security by pursuing their own share of wealth and power that engendered a new form of colonialism: neocolonialism (Kupchan and Kupchan 1997, p. 60).

In his discussion, Spykman overlooked the very definition of the term "independence" of "small states," namely: the Philippines, Burma (present-day Myanmar), and Indonesia, by stating that their independence is correlated to the effective establishment of these powers within the Southeast Asian region (Spykman 1944, p. 58). Rather than recognizing the true aspirations of the people residing in such countries, Spykman is advocating for the divvying up of these countries into spheres of influence of these Western powers, wherein the responsibility for territorial security and integrity falls into the hands of these powers, not the small states. Thus, it asserted that Spykman himself fell into a working contradiction that equated independence to Western dependency. Spykman, unfortunately, fails to recognize that these nations are acting on the precepts of *raison d'état*, which reasonably furthered the right of a nation to pursue their national interest in any means employed (Kissinger 1994, p. 58).

IV. CONCLUSION

Spykman's *The Geography of the Peace* is a work of well-grounded intellectual interrogation as it addresses the necessity of the time to assert and adopt a more realistic and pragmatic geopolitical approach to properly hold what Spykman has termed global "collective security." Despite this, Spykman's central focus: the terms "geography" and "peace," terms that seem not abstruse enough for a layman or an academic alike, were, nonetheless, cleverly exploited primarily by the Americans after the Second World War as a "Trojan Horse" for anti-communist hegemony—a world of free societies associated with the United States. This argument serves as the crux of the ideological-cum-geopolitical interaction in American foreign policy to the present, which tends to undermine the principle of national sovereignty of the "small states," mentioned by Spykman, in exchange for American dependency. Furthermore, as seen in the eyes of a 21st-century reader, the very shortcomings evident in the book are not only methodological and authorial representations but also conceptual and bounded by the time the book was written, elicited from the optimistic viewpoint of Spykman himself regarding mutual international cooperation of the major powers to promote "peace." Thus, Spykman's work is an insightful account that makes a meaningful contribution to the emerging arena of works tackling international relations and geopolitical analysis, more so during times of regional and global conflicts and security issues that still resonate in the present.

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