Mackinder, Spykman and the Geopolitical Significance of Ballistic Missile Defence

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As missile defence becomes a central feature of many states’ security postures, it is attendant to frame the enterprise in a wider strategic context to understand its importance. The classic geopolitical dichotomy between Heartland and Rimland states outlined by Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman might help us understand the geopolitical significance of global allied missile defences.

In 1904, Halford Mackinder, the English geographer, outlined a parsimonious framework by which the geopolitics of Eurasia, and by extension the world, might be understood. The World Island of Eurasia, which contained the bulk of the world’s productive and military potential, was divided, according to Mackinder, between a ‘Heartland’ encompassing Central Asia, Russia and Iran – which, if unified, would possess the power and geographic centrality to overwhelm the states of the coastal marginal crescent – and its ‘offshore islands’ (continental Europe, much of the Middle East, India and maritime East Asia, along with North America and Britain).

The importance of the Heartland, it might be noted, is positional in Mackinder’s theory. As such, the power that came to dominate the Heartland need not be from within it per se – Mackinder identified Germany and later China as potential Heartland powers, given the fact that they dominated continental access routes to the Heartland and potentially had the capacity to dominate this region. A combination of railroads and resource self-sufficiency would, according to Mackinder, allow a power straddling the Heartland to mobilise and deploy resources far more rapidly than a maritime competitor (Britain, it was assumed) that dominated the maritime lanes of commerce, along with a series of positions along the periphery of Eurasia.

Mackinder’s thesis soon drew fire from a number of critics, most notably US political scientist Nicholas Spykman, who contended that the superior mobility of maritime powers – along with their capacity to project power inland from positions along Mackinder’s marginal crescent (the Rimland in Spykman’s parlance) – would allow them to move goods, resources and troops quicker than a Heartland power and, moreover, to project sufficient power ashore to ensure the political division of the Heartland. By supporting weaker powers resisting domination by a continental power or bloc in the Heartland, Rimland powers could ensure that no state or bloc consolidated the power to push out from the Heartland towards the coasts of Eurasia. What both Mackinder and Spykman agreed on in principle, however, was a schema that entailed the division of the world along fault lines dividing the Heartland and Rimland and the belief that the region that provided greater mobility and geographical centrality to its possessor would, by extension, represent a stepping stone to world power.

This geopolitical narrative provides an overarching framework within which to examine the role of both Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities and ballistic missile defence (BMD). A combination of technological and geopolitical developments has knit the states of Mackinder’s Heartland closer together than ever before. In geopolitical terms, the pressure of adjusting to a potentially hostile political environment has pushed states such as Russia, China and Iran into ever-closer alignment. Technologically, the emergence of high-speed railroads holds open the possibility of unifying Mackinder’s Heartland and the rest of Eurasia in a way not previously imaginable and, for the first time in history, to provide the continental alternative to maritime commercial routes that Mackinder erroneously believed steam-powered railways would. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most noteworthy manifestation of this phenomenon. While driven by what Mackinder dubbed a hybrid power – one straddling both Heartland and Rimland areas – the BRI passes squarely through the Central Asian portion of Mackinder’s pivot. Without the quiescence of the states that comprise this region, the framework would be unviable.

Simultaneously, the emergence of A2AD capabilities has allowed this belt of continental land powers to ‘purchase’ security from maritime powers on the cheap, insulating their rail- and road-based trade arteries from maritime power projection with a continuous layer of A2AD capabilities that runs from the Black and Baltic seas through the East and South China Seas, the Arabian Gulf (control of which is increasingly contested by Pakistan) and the Gulf. If maritime powers cannot project power ashore in these littorals, they cannot exert control over the land-based trade arteries that will straddle Eurasia. Moreover, in time, the increasing reach of shore-based A2AD means that they may struggle to maintain a presence on maritime sea lines of communication (SLOC) as well. In due time, this belt of
A Standard Missile Three (SM-3) is launched from the guided missile cruiser USS Shiloh (CG 67) during a joint Missile Defense Agency, US Navy ballistic missile flight test. Courtesy of US Navy/Wikimedia
contiguous or near contiguous denied zones may come to encompass the increasingly viable Arctic Sea routes, which promise to significantly reduce the transport times between the twin ends of Eurasia and could, in the long term, join and to some degree supplant Atlantic and Pacific trade routes as the conduit for goods between Eurasia and the Western hemisphere, should the Northwest Passage through the Arctic become viable.

Traversing the Arctic could, for example, reduce the time taken for a container to reach Hamburg from Shanghai by 30% relative to current shipping routes through the Suez Canal. China and Russia are investing in icebreakers to traverse the region, and Russia is developing submarine and shore-based capabilities sufficient to deny a hostile navy access to the Arctic – effectively turning it into a ‘territorialised’ sea that serves as an extension of land routes. Melting ice caps and a growing Russian fleet of nuclear icebreakers could, in due course, make this a viable shipping route and confer a great deal of power on the countries that control it.

Certainly, these developments are not the product of a conscious grand design. Tactical adjustments to local conditions have produced a coherent overarching framework for Heartland powers – one of continental trade belts crossing the heartland ringed at sea by contiguous A2AD bubbles that straddle the Arctic, Indo-Pacific and the Gulf. While individual continental land powers independently sought to find overland routes and develop sea denial capabilities as a result of their own vulnerability to sea power, this has nonetheless produced a coherent overarching system encircling the Heartland (and knitting together continental states) with shared interests.

The cumulative effect of these shifts could portend a transition in geopolitics comparable to the shift, described by the historian Ian Morris, that saw the powers of the Atlantic seaboard (in particular Spain, the Netherlands, Britain and then the US) wrest pre-eminence from their Mediterranean counterparts precisely by virtue of the fact that they straddled the trade routes that would be most salient in the future and controlled the points that constituted sluice gates to these routes, such as Gibraltar and, later, the Cape of Good Hope, Malacca and the Suez (four of Admiral Sir Jackie Fisher’s ‘five keys that lock up the world’). It was not merely the fact that these choke-points could be closed off in war that mattered, but also that dominance over them gave maritime powers an unspoken but palpable leverage in peacetime.

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Matching this is an increasing emphasis on missile defence by Rimland states, including the US and the UK. While this is itself a series of adjustments to local threats the pattern of adoption nonetheless provides an insight into the future strategic role of BMD capabilities. If the ability to counter A2AD capabilities is a prerequisite for maritime power projection, expeditionary warfare and the maintenance of a non-territorialised open sea – all of which are prerequisites to project power into the Heartland to keep it divided and to maintain the competitiveness of existing sea lanes and the advantage of mobility and centrality that they provide maritime and coastal powers. The states of the Eurasian Rimland thus have a joint interest in developing the capacity to counter A2AD capabilities. The role of missile defence in mitigating the risks posed by capabilities such as shore-based missiles is a core component of this.

Of course, countering shore-based ballistic missiles, which constitute one part of an A2AD strategy, is not in and of itself enough, but it is a prerequisite for any maritime power hoping to project power ashore or exercise command at sea in the 21st Century. Moreover, given the capacity of shore-based conventional missiles to be used against fixed assets, such as bases or even cities, the capacity to contain this threat is a core component of maintaining the capacity and will to project power along Eurasia’s littorals.

To some degree, Rimland powers are taking steps that could represent the seeds of a coherent response. The recent US missile defence review has, for the first time, identified countering theatre level area denial capabilities as a missile defence priority. The US has also encouraging its Middle Eastern partners to unify their BMD capabilities to counter Iran’s capacity to target ports and other vital access nodes in the Gulf with ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, most investments in missile defence by Rimland powers are ad hoc responses to local missile and A2AD threats. Synthesising these capabilities into a coherent missile defence framework straddling the perimeter of Eurasia as part of a wider alliance strategy is, then, a central imperative for these powers.

The central conclusion that might be drawn from this is that rather than simply being an ad hoc response to local threats (such as rogue states with nuclear missiles), the development of BMD poses an answer to a wider strategic question: will previously unified SLOC be ‘Balkanised’ into maritime territorial blocs, each of which is de facto owned by states with A2AD capabilities that can render them inaccessible to rivals even as land-based states are brought closer together by technology and politics – or will maritime powers develop the theatre missile defence capabilities that will allow them to maintain unitary SLOC and projecting power inland, maintaining the divided state of the Eurasian supercontinent?

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