

## Conference Report

# Halford Mackinder's 'Heartland' – a Help or Hindrance?

Tashkent, 2–3 December 2004

A century after their original publication, what is the significance of the geopolitical theories of Halford Mackinder? On 2–3 December 2004 the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, Uzbekistan hosted an international symposium, 'Halford Mackinder's "Heartland" – a Help or Hindrance?' to address exactly this question. The participants – largely geographers and political scientists – gathered together from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, India, the USA, Italy and the UK, to discuss the extent to which Sir Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theories help or hinder the analysis of contemporary Central Asian states' international relations. Papers were presented in English, Russian and Uzbek, and the event was supported by the UK Committee on Central and Inner Asia, and Tashkent's Center for Political Studies.

Both the timing and the place of the symposium were significant. It occurred a century after Halford Mackinder delivered his famous 'Geographical pivot of history' lecture to the Royal Geographical Society which, following its publication in the pages of this journal, became a landmark text in what subsequently became known as geopolitical thought. It remains to this day one of the most widely known publications by a geographer. The centenary has been marked by a number of conference sessions and publications which have taken stock of the state of Mackinder studies and re-evaluated his legacy, not least a symposium at the Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers' annual conference in 2003, published in the final 2004 edition of the *Geographical Journal*. The Tashkent symposium was thus conceived as a continuation of that scholarly endeavour.

Likewise, the selection of venue was important. Whilst some Anglo-American scholars proclaimed the final burial of Mackinder's geopolitical thought

with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent states in Central Asia occasioned a renaissance of interest in his writings. Scholars, analysts and journalists have frequently referenced Mackinder's ideas to explain and predict the foreign policy of external powers towards the Central Asian republics. Hence it was considered appropriate that a specialist symposium convened to assess this aspect of Mackinder scholarship should take place in Central Asia.

Furthermore, holding the symposium in the 'heartland' itself was as an act of intellectual decolonization. Through reasons of distance, expense, and familiarity, it can be difficult for Central Asian (and other FSU) scholars to attend conferences such as those about Mackinder held in the UK and to publish in European and North American journals. As a result, their perspectives may be overlooked by Western-based scholars.

The majority of papers presented assessed the extent to which the ideas in Mackinder's 1904 paper, and its later reworkings, can be said to describe the actual contours of post-1991 international relations in Central Asia. Opinion was divided as to the contemporary relevance of his ideas. Posing a different question, some participants read his work, and that of those who use him to analyse Central Asia, not as an objective theory illuminating state behaviour so much as casting light upon the imaginations of intellectuals of statecraft espousing subjective political and ideological positions.

Shifting the geographical focus, a Ukrainian participant assessed how well Mackinder's ideas could explain Russian, EU and American responses to the presidential election crisis that was engulfing her country, while an Uzbek scholar used his theory to attempt to explain British and German positions on the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Discussions covered issues well rehearsed by scholars of Mackinder, such as the place of geographical determinism and changing technology, land versus sea power, and democracy and imperialism in his thought. In addition, topics peculiarly pertinent to the region were discussed. Some participants were concerned that Mackinder's conceptualization conditions the notion of Central Asia as an essential space of competition for influence between external powers, determining the region as a site of conflict rather than cooperation. The intellectual history of how his geopolitical thinking – denigrated during the Soviet period as a mask for bourgeois interests – reached Central Asia via Russia in the 1990s was rehearsed. In particular, it was much debated whether being in the 'heartland' was itself beneficial or harmful for Central Asian states. It was striking to note how many local undergraduates and younger scholars were interested in Mackinder's theories.

It is impossible to do justice to the discussions held both formally and informally over two days. However, three observations can be made that will be of interest to an international audience. Firstly, and most obviously, the independence of the Central Asian republics since 1991 has given Mackinder's geopolitical theories a new lease of life. Inasmuch as this is largely concerned with revisiting the validity of the 'pivot'/'heartland' concept, this may be seen as less of a new departure, but rather as a continuation of the Cold War project of analysing the Eurasian superpower clash in Mackinderian terms. Secondly, this revival of interest in Mackinder is focussed on a small number of his essays – essentially his 1904, 1919 and 1943 publications – and is largely confined to questions of geostrategy. It is true that this was partially influenced by the terms set by the title of the symposium, but the call for papers did invite submissions on any aspect of Mackinder's thought. Thirdly and finally, the symposium demonstrated a significant degree of mutual ignorance between different bodies of scholarship. Even English-speaking

participants often did not have access to the secondary literature on Mackinder (a Central Asian political scientist spoke of how the lack of a biographical study of Mackinder in Russian impeded teaching), whilst recent publications in English have generally been ignorant of work by Central Asian scholars.

The Tashkent symposium thus raises questions for future research. How can scholars of Mackinder from different academic circles better interact and exchange resources and ideas? Almost half the presenters were women, whilst every English language book on Mackinder and the vast majority of scholarly articles have been authored by men. Why is this the case? Finally, and most importantly, it shows that Mackinder is alive and well and living in Central Asia. Intellectual histories of the influence of his thought can no longer be confined simply to the West. For better or worse, the continued relevance of his work in a new political context shows the power and flexibility of his thinking, and suggests that there is no reason to assume interest in it will decline any time soon. It is therefore vital that geographers, political scientists, and others continue to engage with it.

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