THE FORMATION OF THE BRITISH GEOSTRATEGIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

The article explores the development of geostrategic thought in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on the relationship between Geographical Determinism, Political Geography, Geopolitics, and Geostrategy. It examines the emergence of geostrategic theories in the major world empires, with particular attention to Great Britain as a maritime power. The study focuses on the British geostrategic objective of establishing control over strategically important geographical nodes and international maritime trade routes and examines the theory of "Sea Power" as a response to these strategic imperatives. The article also considers the development of the Anglo-Saxon theory of "Sea Power" in Great Britain and the USA as a counterbalance to the German theory of "Middle Europe" (German – Mitteleuropa), which emphasized the strategic importance of a central continental location.

The study concludes that British geostrategy was fundamentally shaped by the pursuit of maritime dominance, which enabled Great Britain to secure strategic resources, particularly Middle Eastern oil, protect India, and thereby reinforce its status as a global power.

Keywords: Great Britain, Geostrategy, Geopolitics, theory of "Sea Power", Halford Mackinder.

Introduction

Thanks to the Great Geographical Discoveries that took place in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, not only did the geographical horizon and geographical ideas of Europeans expand, but European (later Western) civilization also acquired a global character. The famous American theorist Samuel Huntington (1996) wrote: "With the beginning of the modern era,

about AD 1500, global politics assumed two dimensions. For over four hundred years, the nation states of the West – Great Britain, France, Spain, Austria, Prussia, Germany, the United States, and others – constituted a multipolar international system within Western civilization and interacted, competed, and fought wars with each other. At the same time, Western nations also expanded, conquered, colonized, or decisively influenced every other civilization" (p. 21).

European/Western hegemony in the international system reached its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And at the same time, the idea that a civilized European should "civilize" the rest of the world prevailed among Europeans, which the world-famous English writer Rudyard Kipling (1899) formulated as "The White Man's Burden (mission – Hayk Nazaryan)" (pp. 290-291).

A British historian, Arnold Toynbee (1955), speaking about the Western World, wrote: "The Industrial Revolut ion and the contemporary emergence of Nationalism in the Western World were working together to build up 'Great Powers', each of which claimed to be a universe in itself" (p. 9).

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the world entered the so-called "Age of Imperialism"* and a struggle between world empires began to "redivide the divided world". Each empire tried to expand its "Living Space"** through territorial expansion and established control over key geographic nodes and strategic raw materials. It is necessary to remember the formula established by the 18th century English economist Thomas Robert Malthus (1798), according to which the population of the world "increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence (resources – Hayk Nazaryan) increases only in an arithmetical ratio" (p. 14).

According to the theory of Geographical Determinism, the development of society is greatly influenced by the geographical environment. The Geographical Determinism became the basis for the formation of a new science, the Political Geography,*** and its sub-discipline, Geopolitics, in Europe in the late 19th century – early 20th century. The term Geostrategy is

* The term "Imperialism" was derived from the Latin word imperium – power, domination. The term was first put into scientific circulation by British theorist John Hobson (see more in detail in Hobson, J.A. (1902)).

** The term "Living Space" (German – Lebensraum) was first used by the German theorist Friedrich Ratzel (see more in detail in Ratzel, F. (1897)).

*** The term "Political Geography" was first put into scientific circulation by French theorist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot in his work, titled "Political geography" in 1751 (see more in detail in Heffernan, M. (1994). 328–343).

used along with the term Geopolitics*. Geostrategy** is also known as Grand Strategy in Great Britain. British strategist Liddell Hart (1954) noted. "The first stage of Grand strategy – that of developing and co-ordinating all forms of warlike activity, and all the possible instruments which may be used to operate against the enemy's will" (pp. 11, 308).

The Geostrategic Theory of "Sea Power"

American geostrategist Nicholas Spykman (1942) wrote: "Since the Renaissance and the Reformation, the balance of power has been a favorite topic of speculation among the political philosophers of Europe. After Emperor and Pope had lost their function as keystones in the European political order, a search began for a new integrating principle. It was found in the 'balance of power,' which became the subject of learned discourses... Because of its contribution to her territorial security, relative naval strength, and political power, the continental balance has been an objective of British foreign policy for the last three hundred years (17^{th}-19^{th} centuries – Hayk Nazaryan)... A divided and balanced continent is a prerequisite to the continued existence of the Empire, and a divided continent means British hegemony" (pp. 20, 103, 105). Perceiving its national interest to be in the preservation of the European balance, Great Britain was the only country "which sought no more for itself on the Continent than preventing the domination of Europe by a single power. In pursuit of that objective, it made itself available to any combination of nations opposing such an enterprise... Great Britain's role as the balancer reflected a geopolitical fact of life. The survival of a relatively small island off the coast of Europe would have been jeopardized had all the resources of the Continent been mobilized under a single ruler. For, in such a case, England (as it was before its union with Scotland in 1707) possessed much smaller resources and population and would have sooner or later been at the mercy of a Continental empire" (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 70-71).

Great Britain used Naval Strategy to imply limiting military operations on land, instead, it used naval forces to establish control over the enemy's

* According to the world-famous Encyclopedia Britannica: "Geopolitics combines the concepts and techniques of a variety of disciplines for the purpose of formulating strategic policy in international relations". The term "Geopolitics" was first put into scientific circulation by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in his work, titled "The State as Lifeform" in 1916 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1961, pp. 149, 182).

** The term Geostrategy was first put into scientific circulation by American political scientist Frederick L. Schuman (see more in detail in Schuman, F.L. (1942), 161–165; Gyorgy, A. (1943). 347–362).

communication routes, to blockade enemy ports, and exert economic pressure, to exhaust the enemy's forces, etc., and emerged victorious wars against Spain, France, and the Netherlands in the 16th-19th centuries, becoming a world maritime power and earning the title of "Queen of the Seas". Speaking about this fact, the British geographer and geopolitician James Fairgrieve (1927) noted that Great Britain, as a result of those wars, "became not only a Sea Power but the Ocean Power", and that was due to the fact that "British navy not only had a naval tradition behind it, but a tradition of advance in ability to use and save energy on the sea" (pp. 170, 180). As a maritime power, Great Britain's primary goal was to control strategically important geographical nodes and international maritime trade routes (islands, straits and canals, ports), which would strengthen empire's position in the world. Therefore, only the geostrategic theory of "Sea Power" was aimed at solving these problems. This theory was born in the Anglo-Saxon world (Great Britain and the USA) as a counterbalance to the German theory of "Middle Europe" (German – Mitteleuropa)*, which considered a central continental location paramount.

The founders of the "Sea Power" theory were military historian and United States Navy Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan** and strategist British Royal Navy Vice Admiral Philip Howard Colomb. In particular, F. Colomb, in his military scientific work titled "Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practice Historically Treated" (1891), considered the establishment of dominance at sea and the establishment of control over the world's maritime trade routes*** as a primary goal. That was the main problem that the British Royal Navy had to solve, because, according to F. Colomb (1891): "Owing to the position which sea-borne commerce takes as the major part of the wealth and stability of nations (in this case, the British – Hayk Nazaryan), there may

* The "Middle Europe" included within its geographical boundaries the area from the North and Baltic Seas to the Alps and the Adriatic Sea. The geostrategic theory of "Middle Europe" was put forward by the German geographer Joseph Partsch and the German theorist Friedrich Naumann (see more in detail in Partsch, J. (1904); Naumann, F. (1916)). Later, another prominent representative of German geostrategist Karl Haushofer, deepening the contrast "Land – Sea", put forward a new geostrategic theory, the basis of which was the formation of a "Continental Alliance" (around the Berlin – Moscow axis) against the Anglo-Saxon maritime states (see more in detail in Haushofer, K. (1941)).

** Alfred Mahan's theory of "Sea Power" envisioned the United States becoming a global maritime power in the future, following the example of Great Britain (see more in detail in Mahan, A.T. (1890)).

*** Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Admiral of the Soviet Fleet Ivan Isakov (Hovhannes Ter-Isahakyan) emphasized in his work that maritime trade routes for Great Britain "were of vital importance not only for military and sea power, but also for the economy, and therefore for the existence of the state itself" (Isakov, 1984, p. 187).

be, and have been, wars wholly naval – wars where the operations on the land, or against the land, have been insignificant, or else wholly absent, in comparison with the operations on the water" (p. 80).

Another British strategist, Julian Corbett (1918), wrote about this issue: "Command of the sea, therefore, means nothing but the control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes. The object of naval warfare is the control of communications, and not, as in land warfare, the conquest of territory" (p. 80). J. Corbett opposed the theory of Absolute War* defined by the German theorist Carl Clausewitz, and considered limited military operations as primary, and believed that only states (in this case, Great Britain – Hayk Nazaryan) separated from the land by the sea could afford to use such a strategy, whose fleet, dominating the sea, could prevent a possible invasion of their own territories by the enemy.**

British military theoretician Edgar James Kingston-McCloughry (1959) emphasized the idea that "a powerful navy, ensuring dominance at sea and giving the opportunity to the merchant fleet to bring us huge revenues, also allowed it to destroy huge continental armies without excessive costs" (p. 27). British strategist Liddell Hart (1954) emphasized that the primary objective should not be the complete defeat of the enemy's forces on the battlefield,*** but the exhaustion of the enemy's forces, and that it "should be disproportionately greater than on yourself. The object may be sought by raiding his supplies, by local attacks which annihilate or inflict disproportionate loss on parts of his force, by luring him into unprofitable attacks, by causing an excessively wide distribution of his force and, not least, by exhausting his moral and physical energy (potential – Hayk Nazaryan)" (pp. 186-187).

British military theorist Spencer Wilkinson (1895), while emphasizing the role of the navy, also emphasized the importance of joint operations between

* The main objective of the theory of Absolute War was the complete destruction of the enemy's force and the attainment of a political goal by force of arms. Another German strategist, General Friedrich von Ludendorff, developing this theory of Absolute War, later advanced the theory of "Total War". According to that theory: "The Total War, which is not merely an affair of the contending forces, but which affects the life and soul of each member of the warring peoples… The war zone covers in the true sense of the word the entire territory of those engaged in war. Not only the armies, but the peoples themselves are subject to the direct operations of war" (General Ludendorff, 1936, p. 8).

** See more in detail in Corbett, J.S. (1918). 43–76.

*** The British, and particularly Liddell Hart's "Strategy of Indirect Approach" came to oppose the traditional German (Carl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Alfred von Schlieffen) strategy, according to which the primary strategic objective in war was "the complete defeat of the enemy's main forces in the main battle" (see more in detail in Clausewitz, C. (1883); Moltke, H. (1895); Schlieffen, A. (1913)).

the navy and the army. In particular, he wrote: "The British Empire* cannot be defended without the most perfect co-operation between the navy and the army... When the navy has won its battles there may be scope for military operations outside the borders of British territory, but any operations required outside Great Britain from the military forces, before the superiority of the British fleets has been established, will be carried on under the disadvantage of precarious communications by sea" (pp. 102-103).

The development of British geostrategic thought was continued by Admiral of the Fleet, John Arbuthnot Fisher, who stated that there are "five keys to the world. The Strait of Dover, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Straits of Malacca, and the Cape of Good Hope". These important geographical nodes had both military and economic significance and formed the main sea trade route to India** and the Far East and were controlled by the British Navy (Gough, 2014, p. 36).

By the early 20th century, the oil reserves of the Middle East, including Persia and the region of Mosul, were gaining political, economic, and strategic importance for Great Britain. It was due to the fact that, in 1904, Admiral John Fisher, who assumed the position of First Sea Lord of the British Royal Navy, put forward a large-scale reform program to replenish the fleet with a new generation of battleships (dreadnoughts), submarines, and aircraft carriers, and to organize their operation with oil. According to Fisher (1920), who was called the "Godfather of Oil", the transition from coal to oil would increase the speed, maneuverability and efficiency of warships (Vol. 1, p. 123; Vol. 2, pp. 184-196). The issue of the British Navy switching to oil fuel was finally decided when, in 1911, Winston Churchill assumed the post of First Lord of the Admiralty and accepted the reasoning given by Fisher. As a result, in 1912 the British Navy switched from coal to oil fuel. With that move, however, the British Royal Navy became dependent on a vulnerable supply of Middle Eastern oil*** instead of a reliable supply of Welsh coal. Therefore,

* By 1914, only a few thousand British military personnel and civil servants controlled about 11 million square miles and almost 400 million non-British people (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 19).

** Great Britain, through the British East India Company, established in 1600, gradually occupied India economically and politically during the 17th and 18th centuries and turned it into its colony. Consequently, in the 19th century, the main geostrategic axis became the issue of India's defense (see more in detail in Macgregor, Ch.M. (1884)). Moreover, a major representative of British geostrategic thought, Lord George Nathaniel Curzon (1892), Viceroy of India and later Foreign Secretary of Great Britain, in the late 19th century, indicated: "without India the British Empire could not exist" (p. 4).

*** At the beginning of the 20th century, British-Australian businessman William Knox D'Arcy received a concession from the Shah of Persia to extract oil in Persia and founded the famous "Anglo-Persian Oil Company" in 1909. In 1935, the Company was renamed "Anglo-Iranian Oil Company", and in 1954, "British Petroleum".

establishing control over Middle Eastern oil reserves became a key geostrategic issue for Great Britain in the future, because, as Admiral J. Fisher formulated: "He who controls the oil also controls the world" (Fursenko, 1965, p. 376).

Mackinder's Geostrategic Formula

The British geostrategic thought reached its peak in the early 20th century, thanks to the geostrategist Halford John Mackinder. In his first major work, titled "Britain and the British Seas" (1902), he noted: "By virtue of her neighbourhood to the Continent, Britain is at the end of the Old World: by virtue of the ocean-arm which isolates her from the Continent, she is at the beginning of the New. Dover belongs to the New World, yet Liverpool is still of the Old. Geographical position has thus given to Britain a unique part in the world's drama" (p. 358).

H. Mackinder presented his geostrategic views in a report at the Royal Geographical Society on January 25, 1904, entitled "The Geographical Pivot of History". It was published in "The Geographical journal" in April of the same year. In the article, the author specifically noted: "The all-important result of the discovery of the Cape Road to the Indies was to connect the western and eastern coastal navigations of Euro-Asia, even though by a circuitous route, and thus in some measure to neutralize the strategical advantage of the central position of the steppe-nomads by pressing upon them in rear... A generation ago steam and the Suez Canal appeared to have increased the mobility of Sea Power relatively to Land Power... Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan are now a ring of outer and insular bases for sea power and commerce, inaccessible to the land power of Euro-Asia" (Mackinder, 1904, pp. 432-434).

According to H. Mackinder (1904), the world was geostrategically divided into two parts: an oceanic region, which he called the "Outer Crescent" and included the United States, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, Australia and Japan, and a continental region, which he called the "Inner or Marginal Crescent" and included Western Europe, the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire (including North Africa and the Middle East), Iran, India and China. The central part of Eurasia (the core of the "Inner Crescent"), he called the "Pivot Area"* (p. 435).

At the same time, Mackinder (1904) emphasized that the construction of transcontinental railroads could gradually change that balance of power. In

* The geographical division and classification presented here are based on Mackinder's map in his 1904 article (p. 435).

particular, he wrote: "Railways acted chiefly as feeders to ocean-going commerce. But transcontinental railways are now transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such effect as in the closed heartland of Euro-Asia" (p. 434). Continuing his analysis he noted: "Russia replaces the Mongol Empire. Her pressure on Finland, on Scandinavia, on Poland, on Turkey, on Persia, on India, and on China, replaces the centrifugal raids of the steppemen. In the world at large she occupies the central strategical position held by Germany in Europe. She can strike on all sides and be struck from all sides, save the north. The full development of her modern railway mobility is merely a matter of time… The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building*, and the empire of the world would then be in sight. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia" (p. 436).

H. Mackinder developed that theory in his next work, titled "Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction" (1919). In particular, he considered the "Heartland"** to be a priority from a global strategic perspective. The "Heartland" includes "the Baltic Sea, the navigable Middle and Lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia. Within it, therefore, were Brandenburg-Prussia and Austria-Hungary, as well as Russia – a vast triple base of manpower" (p. 141).

According to H. Mackinder (1919), the "Heartland" was the geographical "key" of the world domination. Therefore, H. Mackinder briefly formulated the following formula:

"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland,
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island,
Who rules the World-Island commands the World" (p. 194).

Conclusion

Thus, summarizing our work, we can state the following:

Firstly, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a number of geostrategic theories emerged in the world empires, including Great Britain, which ideologically had to "justify" the given state's "right" to become a world power.

* Mackinder's fears were not unfounded. At the same time, German geostrategist Friedrich Ratzel, in his book "The Sea as the Source of the Greatness of a People" (1900), considered the creation of a powerful navy to be the main prerequisite for Germany's "world power" (Dugin, 2000, p. 21).

** The term was formed from the words heart and land.

Secondly, Great Britain, being a maritime power, had as its primary goal to establish the control over strategically important geographical nodes and international maritime trade routes, which was to contribute to the strengthening of the empire's position in the world. Therefore, only the geostrategic theory of "Sea Power" was aimed at solving these problems.

Thirdly, thanks to the use of Naval Strategy, which implied limiting military operations on land, became not only a Sea Power but the Ocean Power.

Fourthly, the military-political leadership of Great Britain was primarily interested in ensuring the safety of vital sea trade routes and the defense of its main colony, India, as well as in ensuring uninterrupted supplies of Middle Eastern oil for the British fleet.

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