



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Rosenboim, O. (2015). Geopolitics and empire: visions of regional world order in the 1940s. *Modern Intellectual History*, 12(2), pp. 353-381. doi: 10.1017/s1479244314000547

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/18393/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1479244314000547>

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

---

---



## 1. Introduction

The study of international relations is concerned, explicitly and implicitly, with the category of space. The geographic space, its perceptions and representations, provide a fundamental and intriguing conceptual framework for understanding and analyzing international relations. Yet as the political scientist Harvey Starr suggested in his 2013 ISA presidential address, International Relations scholars ignore the notion of ‘space’, misinterpret it as deterministic, or dismiss it as irrelevant to their analysis.<sup>1</sup> Starr’s proposal of taking the concept of ‘space’ more seriously applies also for historians of international thought: in this article I propose to trace back the role spatial categories, in particular geopolitics, played in shaping 1940s international thought. I will discuss two geopolitical theories to explore how interpretations of political space informed American ideas of postwar world order.

In the early 1940s American international thinkers used spatial concepts to outline the postwar political map, and envisage the role of the United State in it. Geopolitics, which they understood as the dynamic, ever-changing interaction between political government writ-large and natural geography, provided both research questions and interpretative tools. Since the approach to geopolitics that many promoted rejected the static, deterministic and immutable perception of geography, I suggest that the term ‘dynamic geopolitics’ describes well their ideas of reciprocal influence of the human and the natural spheres. Wartime geopoliticians would have shared Starr’s view that “geography affects changing perceptions of the possibilities and probabilities provided by the geographic environment.”<sup>2</sup> Spatial

---

<sup>1</sup> Harvey Starr, ‘On Geopolitics: Spaces and Places’, *International Studies Quarterly* (2013) 1-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

representations and geographical perceptions revolving around a dynamic and complex notion of geopolitics were gaining popularity among scholars of world politics. However, as will be shown, geopolitics failed to make a long-lasting conceptual contribution to political science, or define the research aims of the nascent discipline of International Relations (IR).<sup>3</sup>

In what follows I return to two key figures in geopolitical thought, Owen Lattimore and Nicholas John Spykman, who contributed to shaping the pluralistic nature of international studies in the United States during the 1940s. Both identified in the war a unique potential for international change based on geopolitical relations. Taking as the starting point of my argument the assumption that implicit spatial representations in political thought derive from concrete experiences of a given society, I explore the spatial representations in their theories.<sup>4</sup> The intellectual links between geopolitical thought and world order suggests that ideas about political space formed an indispensable part of theorizing international relations in the 1940s. Their notions of political space offered an alternative to legal conception of internationalism, and a new way of imagining pluralism and diversity in world politics, particularly in relation to imperialism and regionalism.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The marginalization of geopolitics within international relations scholarship is evident in Starr's call for its reintegration in the discipline's conceptual toolbox: 'It is important to stress that despite living in the interdependent, transnational, and globalized world of the twenty-first century, geographic factors such as territory and borders are still integral and meaningful elements of world politics.' Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War* (Minneapolis, 2010), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Martti Koskenniemi, *From Apology to Utopia: The Structure of International Legal Argument* (Helsinki, 1989); For an alternative account of the League of Nations and legal internationalism see Stephen Wertheim, 'The League That Wasn't: American Designs for a Legalist-Sanctionist League of Nations and the Intellectual Origins of International Organization, 1914–1920', *Diplomatic History* 35 (2011), 797–836.

However, as the decade drew to a close the geopolitical visions of international relations lost favor with academic scholars and the general public alike, and were eventually left out of the canon of International Relations (IR) scholarship.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the war this was far from predictable. Both Spykman and Lattimore held key academic positions in international studies departments in the United States, contributed to discussion of international affairs in scholarly journals and mass-distribution newspapers, and were appreciated by colleagues and politicians alike. Lattimore (1900-1989) was an American sinologist, who grew up in China and made its culture, politics and languages his expertise.<sup>7</sup> Upon his return to the United States as a graduate student at Harvard College in 1928, he met with the prominent geographer Isaiah Bowman who became his academic patron.<sup>8</sup> In 1939, Bowman, then president of Johns Hopkins University, appointed Lattimore as the director of the Walter Hines Page School of International Relations. At the same time, Lattimore acted as editor of *Pacific Affairs*, the journal of the Institute of Pacific Relations. These institutional links allowed him to advance his interdisciplinary vision for the study of international relations in the United States. Lattimore's expertise was appreciated by the political establishment. In 1942 US President F. D. Roosevelt appointed him as advisor to Chiang Kai-shek in China. By then he was considered the foremost American expert on the

---

<sup>6</sup> The history of the birth of International Relations as a discipline, and the hegemonic position of 'realism' within it is told in Nicolas Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory* (New York, 2011). See also Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the 'Loss' of China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), 6; Owen Lattimore, 'Preface', in *Studies in Frontier History* (London, 1962), 16.

<sup>8</sup> On Bowman see Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, Calif., 2003).

Far East, and an 'American geopolitical masterhand'.<sup>9</sup> Lattimore's controversially optimistic attitude towards Soviet Russia encouraged Senator Joseph McCarthy to accuse him, in 1951, of Soviet espionage. Lattimore's biographer argued persuasively that these accusations were false, and indeed Lattimore was fully acquitted, yet his reputation suffered a severe blow and in 1963 he relocated to University of Leeds, UK, where he founded the Mongolian Studies program.

Nicholas John Spykman (1893-1944) was born in the Netherlands, and travelled extensively in Asia and the Middle East before emigrating to the United States. He earned his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>10</sup> Later, with Arnold Wolfers and Frederick Sherwood Dunn he founded the Yale Institute of International Studies (YIIS) where he promoted an interdisciplinary approach to international relations with emphasis on geography and geopolitics.<sup>11</sup> Spykman's two bestselling books on international relations, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942) and *The Geography of Peace* (published posthumously in 1944), won the praise of critics from academia and politics alike, including Isaiah Bowman.<sup>12</sup> Later, Spykman was mentioned among the masterminds of Containment Policy, and

---

<sup>9</sup> The latter title was given by no other than German geopolitician Karl Haushofer, cited in Paul Wohl, "An American 'Geopolitical Masterhand.' ", *Asia* 41 (1941).

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth W Thompson, *Masters of International Thought: Major Twentieth-century Theorists and the World Crisis* (Baton Rouge, 1980), 92; Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (New York, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> The YIIS's contribution to the development of IR in the United States has been well-shown in Paulo Jorge Batista Ramos, *The Role of the Yale Institute of International Studies in the Construction of the United States Security Ideology, 1935-1951* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas J Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (Hamden, Conn., 1944); Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics : the United States and the Balance of Power* (New York, 1942); Isaiah Bowman, 'Review: Political Geography of Power', *Geographical Review* 32 (1942), 349–352.

acknowledged as one of the founding fathers of the discipline of International Relations in America.<sup>13</sup>

The focus on the dynamic qualities of geopolitics permitted Lattimore and Spykman to imagine a world based on pluralism and instability, rather than, as later thinkers characterized the postwar years, on order and division.<sup>14</sup> They envisaged a tripolar international system led by three regional powers, one of which would be the United States. They attempted to account for and accommodate the rise of new powers like China and Russia within the postwar political and economic order by using geopolitical notions. In his geopolitical writings Lattimore is revealed not only as an influential sinologist, but also as a knowledgeable and original political thinker who based his international thought on concrete political and anthropological experience. Lattimore and Spykman exemplify the diversified, complex and interdisciplinary qualities of American scholarship on international relations in the 1940s. By importing concepts and methods from Anthropology, Area Studies, Economics, Geography and Geopolitics, they envisaged a more complex and inclusive approach to the study of the international realm than is usually accounted for. However, this pluralistic moment was short-lived.

Lattimore and Spykman intended to make geopolitics the foundation of the nascent discipline of International Relations, but their project ended in failure. As I will argue, the marginalization of geopolitics within international studies was caused by changes in postwar

---

<sup>13</sup> David Wilkinson, 'Spykman and Geopolitics', in *On Geopolitics*, ed. Ciro E. Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe (Dordrecht, 1985), 77–117; Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory*, 84, 193.

<sup>14</sup> A recent account of the search for order after the war underplays the importance of pluralism and dynamism to contemporary writers, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, 2001).

political space. After the war the key features of international relations became the American-Russian rivalry, human rights universalism, and postcolonial nationalism. Lattimore and Spykman were aware of these issues, and offered solutions based on regional political space. But postwar conception of space reconfigured in two dimensions, the universal and the state-centered, while the regional space lost political relevance. I will reconstruct the complexity of their 1940s geopolitical visions with two objectives in mind: to discover spatial conceptions that may offer new directions in International Relations, and to show that 1940s geopolitics failed because its interpretation of the postwar post-imperial political space overestimated the importance of regions while undermining the national and global dimensions.

The article opens with a critical analysis of the development of American geopolitics in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by a contextualized assessment of the geopolitical world views of Spykman and Lattimore, through four key geopolitical concepts: 'Land, Sea and Air power', 'Scale', 'Frontier' and 'Tripolarity'. Furthermore, I examine their policy prescriptions for the United States, which were surprisingly similar despite their very different worldviews. Finally, I discuss the possible reasons for the marginalization of the global visions of Lattimore and Spykman within the nascent American discipline of International Relations.

## **2. Geopolitics in Transition**

In their intellectual quest for new conceptual tools for the interpretation of international relations, many American scholars found inspiration in other disciplines, including, importantly, political geography and geopolitics. However, it is notable that American

political geographers, or thinkers who applied geographic concepts to international relations, were very keen to distance themselves from the German school of *Geopolitik*, that in the American public imaginary was associated with the Nazi new world order of conquest and oppression.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it is clear that the exchange of geopolitical ideas between the two countries went back at least half a century, and was crucial to the development of geopolitical concepts.

The interest in geopolitical ideas in the United States emerged at the turn of the century, when Fredrick Jackson Turner and Alfred Mahan explained the history and politics of the United States in geopolitical terms.<sup>16</sup> Turner's frontier theory and Mahan's sea power vision became the cornerstones of later geopolitical thinking in America and Germany alike. Friedrich Ratzel's famous notion of *Lebensraum*, the living space of the German people, was elaborated to counterbalance what Mahan described as American naval supremacy.<sup>17</sup> Ratzel's interpretation of politics in organic terms was introduced to an American readership by one of his students, Ellen Churchill Semple, who influenced greatly the younger generation of geographers, including Isaiah Bowman.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the relation between the physical environment and political power was also discussed by the British thinker Halford Mackinder, whose 1904 speech to the Royal Geographical Society warned his British

---

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 274; Hans Werner Weigert, *Generals and Geographers; the Twilight of Geopolitics* (New York, 1942).

<sup>16</sup> A. T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (London, 1905); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1947).

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *Anthropo-geographie* (Stuttgart, 1882).

<sup>18</sup> Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 57 (2013), 138–149.

audience of the risks that a land-based empire in the Russia could pose.<sup>19</sup> He claimed that for the first time it was possible to reveal the ‘geographical causations of universal history’.<sup>20</sup> His theory revolved around the historical notion of the ‘Heartland’, or geographical ‘Pivot’, a wide land mass stretching from the Balkans through Russia to the Arctic Sea. This was the geographic basis of the land power, which was opposed by a technologically-savvy and industrially-advanced sea power. His geopolitical thought sought to help Britain formulate a new geopolitical strategy in an interconnected closed system where competing imperial powers struggled to attain political and military supremacy.

It was only over twenty years later that his idea of the ‘Heartland’ achieved greater international academic acclaim. In 1940s’ United States, Mackinder’s ideas set the terms for geopolitical debate. Gerry Kearns claims that Mackinder’s legacy was evident in three formulations of geopolitical theory: Nazi geopolitics of the 1930s, American Cold War Containment Policy and American unipolarism of the early 2000s.<sup>21</sup> However, I argue that in the 1940s many American geopolitical thinkers found in Mackinder a provocative source of inspiration and used his thesis as the foundation for a new world order. Lattimore and Spykman were both influenced by Mackinder’s concept of the political space which oriented natural geography towards a concrete political end. Nevertheless, they rejected its fundamental spatial assumptions and attempted to elaborate more sophisticated and dynamic accounts of global geopolitics.

---

<sup>19</sup> H. J. Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *The Geographical Journal* 23 (1904), 421–437.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>21</sup> Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (New York, 2009), 17.

During the same period Mackinder also influenced, to his indignation, the German geographer Karl Haushofer who launched *Geopolitik* as a science and a national policy.<sup>22</sup> Haushofer's geopolitics built on Mackinder's theory, yet also recognized the importance of Bowman's geographical survey *The New World*, first published in 1921 and revised in 1928.<sup>23</sup> Presented as a scientific study of the geographic conditions of various political units, the book promoted a new understanding of the relation between the natural and the human. As Smith suggests, in contrast to Bowman's claims the book was not a neutral analysis: its implicit aim was to carve up a new geopolitical space for the United States, as a leader of a new economic and political system which recognized the limits of the state in an interconnected world.<sup>24</sup> Bowman wrote the book after participating in the "Inquiry", the American study group which informed the delegation to the Paris Conference in 1919. His book became an American bestseller, and copies were still distributed to US military libraries in the Second World War.<sup>25</sup> In the interwar years Bowman actively promoted the study of Geography in the United States, and underpinned American political and moral exceptionalism in geopolitical terms, highlighting its unique mission as a global leader. By the mid-1940s he established a new Geography department at Johns Hopkins that wanted to be an 'American Cambridge', co-founded the Council for Foreign Relations and was the motor behind the International Geographical Union. He was a close advisor for President F. D. Roosevelt, and exerted significant influence on the State Department.<sup>26</sup> As much as Bowman

---

<sup>22</sup> Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik Der Pan-Ideen*. (Berlin, 1931); Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire*, chap. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah Bowman, *The New World; Problems in Political Geography*, 4th ed. (Yonkers-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1928).

<sup>24</sup> Neil Smith, 'Bowman's New World and the Council on Foreign Relations', *Geographical Review* 76 (1986), 438–460.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 441.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 'Bowman's New World and the Council on Foreign Relations'.

wanted to distance his scholarship from the *Geopolitik* School, for many he was the ‘American Haushofer’, an important link in the intellectual chain that connected Germany and the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Haushofer saw Bowman’s magnum opus as a challenge: his reply was a geopolitical world vision based on German geopolitical interests. For him *Geopolitik* was a ‘science’ based on the concepts of *Lebensraum*, Land/Sea dichotomy, autarky and the idea of pan-regionalism. In America his ideas were often presented, somewhat simplistically, as a ‘pseudoscientific’ foundation for Hitler’s foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> However, the geographer Robert Strausz-Hupé thought that the study of geopolitics in America was still intellectually worthwhile. In his book *Geopolitics* he surveyed German scholarship in order to offer his American readership a new way of studying international relations, a ‘radical break from the European legal tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century diplomacy’.<sup>29</sup> As he showed, the development of geopolitical thought was a result of the intense, yet often reluctant, relationship between German and American thinkers. For many Americans the Second World War brought this fruitful exchange to a crisis.

Bowman, Lattimore, Mackinder, Strausz- Hupé and Weigert were part of a group of scholars sharing a keen interest in geopolitics. As a review article published in 1942 suggested, they shared the theory of geopolitics that saw states as ‘dynamic phenomena’.<sup>30</sup> This focus on change, mutability and instability in the interaction between politics and

---

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *American Empire*, 287.

<sup>28</sup> John H. Hallowell, ‘Review Article’, *The Journal of Politics* 5 (1943), 187–189. See also Robert Vitalis, “review of David Ekbladh, ‘Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression-Era Origins of Security Studies’, *International Security* 36 (2012)”, *H-Diplo*, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics; the Struggle for Space and Power*. (New York, 1942).

<sup>30</sup> Charles B. Hagan, ‘Geopolitics’, *The Journal of Politics* 4 (1942), 478.

geography helped their geopolitical theories avoid the pitfalls of natural determinism. Geopolitics helped them conceptualize the main characteristic of states as, paradoxically, their instability, which resulted from the constant need to respond to natural, political and social challenges. Without recognizing their own ideological bias towards American exceptionalism, these geopoliticians argued theirs was a new – ‘scientific’ - version of *Geopolitik* in sharp contrast to Hitler’s expansionist ideology.<sup>31</sup> The exchange of ideas between the German and American geopolitical schools culminated in the 1940s when American political geographers used geopolitical concepts like the Land/Sea dichotomy and the frontier to envisage a new global order, often unfolded in anti-imperial terms, in which the United States would have an active leading part.<sup>32</sup> The group’s two collections of essays, entitled *Compass of the World*, manifest well the Americans intention to distinguish between the ‘science’ of Political Geography (which they professed to practice) and the ideologically-biased German *Geopolitik*. Yet this distinction should be taken with a grain of salt, since many – but not all – American geopoliticians were motivated by a not less strong ideological drive to recast the United States as a leading actor in world affairs.<sup>33</sup>

Despite not being directly associated with this American geopolitical circle, Spykman had a great influence on its members. In his review of Spykman’s *The Geography of Peace*, Weigert praised the author as a brilliant and original geopolitical thinker, while criticizing his basic assumptions which he claimed amounted to a ‘disillusioned submission to the old

---

<sup>31</sup> Hans W. Weigert and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography* (London, 1946); Hans Werner Weigert, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, and Richard Edes Harrison, eds., *New Compass of the World : a Symposium on Political Geography* (London, 1949).

<sup>32</sup> Ashworth, ‘Mapping a New World’, 140-142.

<sup>33</sup> I. Bowman, ‘Geography vs. Geopolitics’ in Weigert and Stefansson, *Compass of the World*, 40.

balance of powers game'.<sup>34</sup> Rejecting Spykman's claim that Russia's power concentrated in its western areas, and that China's power lay in its coastal regions, Weigert considered his proposals reactionary and 'outright dangerous'. By contrast to Spykman's proposals, Weigert echoed Lattimore's geopolitical interpretation and suggested that 'a new age is dawning in Asia', an age of local political development which would put an end to imperialism in the region. Weigert concluded his review by acknowledging Spykman's influence on American geopolitics, whilst in the same breath accusing his last work of despair and nihilism. Weigert's review emphasized explicitly the conceptual similarities between Lattimore and Spykman, who used the geopolitical lens to look at international order, yet at the same time pointed to the fundamental difference of their political and normative commitments.

Lattimore used geopolitical ideas to articulate his analytical perspective on world politics and considered it a neutral, scientific tool of political analysis. At first sight, it seems that his geopolitical theory, centered on the land mass, was an interpretation of Mackinder's Heartland. However, Lattimore had a different understanding of the relations between politics and geography, or in other words, of the meaning of Geopolitics as a social science. Geopolitics indicated an approach to analyzing political activity: 'it is a "realist" understanding of a territory and the political powers that control it. It is a unique perspective, a way of studying a political unit, a region or a state, and its position in the world'.<sup>35</sup> Lattimore gave a naïve, perhaps crude interpretation of geopolitics which was mainly aimed at distancing his own attempts at spatial theory from the ideological endeavors of the German geopoliticians. He claimed that the empirical reality, which could be observed by the senses and studied through intensive fieldwork, set the ground for political

---

<sup>34</sup> Hans W. Weigert, 'review of *The Geography of Peace* by N. J. Spykman', in *The Saturday Review*, (22 April 1944), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Solution in Asia* (London, 1945), 58.

theorization, and not vice versa. He argued that international relations had to be studied by rational analysis of the various aspects of human reality encountered in the field. Geographic, anthropological, linguistic and historical knowledge had to be taken into account when analyzing political relations. However, as will be shown, Lattimore's historical narratives were motivated by a normative claim about the obsolescence of 'empire', which he hoped to replace by 'democracy'. Both categories were defined in relation to space and political power: empires were ruled by repressive, external domination, while political power in democracies was internal, popular and participatory. His own work highlights that although geopolitics was often based on empirical knowledge of the world, it was never a value-free perspective.

Spykman's view of geopolitics was more similar to Mackinder's, arguing that geopolitics provided the conceptual framework to take into consideration geographic factors when formulating a state's foreign policy in peacetime or war.<sup>36</sup> He recognized that geopolitics was necessarily oriented towards a political goal, and not just a neutral analytical perspective. Spykman's geopolitical thought evolved from the preliminary argument that 'geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent'.<sup>37</sup> Ó Tuathail has criticized this claim, arguing that natural conditions were in fact less permanent than Spykman wanted: geological shifts and climate change might impact a territory's geographical conditions even in a short time span.<sup>38</sup> Yet Spykman was not a geographical determinist. His fundamental claim was that a state's specific geopolitical conditions and position in the world-system conditioned its relationships with other political

---

<sup>36</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Spykman, *America's Strategy*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London, 1996), 51.

powers, but, importantly, these geopolitical attributes were changing rather than fixed. By contrast to Lattimore, he did not see geopolitics as a recipe for anti-imperial democratic global change, but as a necessary knowledge to strengthen American foreign policy in the existing imperial world order.

### **3. Land, Sea and Air**

The Land/Sea dichotomy was a recurring theme in geopolitical writings on world order in the 1940s, and by consequence the foundation of the international thought of Spykman and Lattimore. In the first half of the twentieth century, Bowman, Mackinder, Mahan and Haushofer gave a political interpretation to these geographical concepts. Symbolically, the Land and Sea represent two out of the four classic natural elements of which the world is made: earth, water, air and fire. However, as the German jurist Carl Schmitt noted, political thinkers usually referred to Land and Sea as conflicting ‘powers’, not only as natural elements.<sup>39</sup> They acquired a historical significance as methods for ordering and controlling the natural and human world, and subsequently gained a mythical meaning as the fundamental principles of entire civilizations. For Lattimore, the Land/Sea dichotomy described two inherently opposed transport technologies and two different means of bringing about political and economic order to a territory. These also implied two historical and political perspectives on a given territory: the oceanic and the continental gazes. As will be shown, Lattimore used this dichotomy to discuss the role of geography and political power in the transformation from imperial to democratic order. By contrast, Spykman saw

---

<sup>39</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea* (Washington, DC, 1997), 12. Despite similarities in their interpretation of Land/Sea dichotomy, there is no evidence that Lattimore or Spykman were familiar with Schmitt’s geopolitical writings.

Land/Sea as two strategies for national defense, applicable to different geopolitical situations indicated by the state's 'place in the world'. As we shall see below, he used this dichotomy to reflect upon his two main geopolitical concepts, the Heartland and the Rimland. Both thinkers argued that the Land/Sea formula was destabilized – but not cancelled - by the increasing relevance of the 'air' element to political and cultural control over men and nature.

Lattimore took as his starting point the assumption that the European and American imperial powers came across the sea to Asia and looked at the vast territory from boats and ports in the littoral zone: 'our thinking about Asia stemmed from the great age of navigation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the old caravan routes were surpassed by new sea routes'.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, he recognized the rise of local Asian powers that established their political centre in the land masses, looking outwards from the continental core towards the coasts. For Lattimore, the former form was repressive and exploitative; the latter was constructive and collaborative.<sup>41</sup> The oceanic gaze, typical of the European empires, does not penetrate the local territory, and has no grasp of its unique cultural and political characteristics. According to Lattimore's conception of knowledge, a superficial outlook cannot offer detailed information of Asia and its people. A political system based on ignorance cannot, therefore, be anything other than repressive. Yet, a territorial gaze allows a better understanding of local habits and structures. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a territorially based system of control was not, in itself, a guarantee against imperial repression and domination. The advantage it offered was merely a potential political interaction, which could lead to the creation of political space which measured itself with the local populations' recognized political agency.

---

<sup>40</sup> Lattimore, *Solution in Asia*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–15.

One of the questions that arise from Lattimore's analysis of the Land/Sea dichotomy relates to the implications of these concepts to a general understanding of history. Did Lattimore see the Land/ Sea dichotomy as an empirical description of historical change, or as a normative criterion to understand power relations in the world? Rowe claims that his view of history was structured by technological determinism because its focus on the Land and Sea binary implied a vision of historical time as consisting of alternating epochs of maritime and territorial modes of transport technology. He accuses Lattimore of overemphasizing the importance of these technologies in forming systems of political control, and in describing the shift from one era to another as unavoidable.<sup>42</sup> However, it is not so obvious that Lattimore regarded this dichotomy as a 'general law'. Rather, he employed these concepts as a part of his anti-imperial discourse, offering a new key to local development that was independent of the European powers sea-based intervention. Lattimore's interpretation of land and sea powers was not meant as a normative conceptualization of history, but as a political proposal to review power relations in the world, and especially in Asia, in order to give an opportunity to local land powers to oppose European imperialism. Therefore, the 'land mass' has an important prescriptive function, aimed at highlighting fundamental limitations in thinking about world politics from an external vantage-point. Lattimore uses the outsider position to argue that superficial knowledge and indirect political involvement have led to the no-longer-desirable imperial domination. The growing international influence of the United States could put it in a position to reverse this trend, and encourage local, direct systems of government.

Lattimore's geopolitics was part of his anti-imperial political project. For him a new interpretation of the political space would be necessary to bring about a postcolonial world

---

<sup>42</sup> William T. Rowe, 'Owen Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (2007), 759.

order based on freedom and democracy. He repositioned Mackinder's notion of Heartland towards the East, undermining the importance of Europe, and argued against the British geographer that the Heartland did not imply conquest or imperial struggle.<sup>43</sup> His geopolitics sought to bring to attention areas of the globe which the Americans and Europeans saw as politically passive, and to give political agency to their populations.<sup>44</sup> If, as Kearns argues, 'geopolitical vision is never innocent; it is always a wish posing as an analysis', then Lattimore's wish was to highlight the international potential of local political power in Asia.<sup>45</sup> This approach was not shared by other American geopolitical thinker at the time – notably Bowman and Spykman – whose fundamental assumption was that the United States should seek to project its political values and interests on other parts of the world. Lattimore's new Heartland was a political project aimed at reshaping the political space of Asia as a large and pluralistic region of democracy, freedom and popular participation. Since Lattimore published his writings in the United States, it is clear that he hoped to convince his readership to take a central role in this political transformation, without, nonetheless, imposing particular interests and values on the nascent democratic region. Lattimore promoted an interventionist position, aimed not at empowering the United States internationally, but at aiding the colonial regions to become 'democratic'.

The complex interaction between the Land/Sea elements was central to Spykman's geopolitical thought. Yet he envisaged a constant struggle between maritime and continental powers struggling to balance their powers and achieve peaceful temporary equilibrium. He

---

<sup>43</sup> Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History'.

<sup>44</sup> Owen Lattimore, 'American Responsibilities in the Far East,' *Virginia Quarterly Review* 16 (1940), 162.

<sup>45</sup> Gerry Kearns, 'Imperial Geopolitics: Geopolitical Visions at the Dawn of the American Century', in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal (Oxford, 2007), 174.

further complicated his thesis by adding two new concepts to the world map: Rimland and Encirclement.<sup>46</sup> The Rimland is the littoral areas of Europe and Asia, stretching from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. This is the world's area of greatest economic, political and demographic development. He located in the Rimland the conceptual and geographical meeting point of the sea and land powers, a 'frontier zone' of political struggle and innovation. Modifying Mackinder's dictum on the Heartland, the political power which controlled the Rimland would dominate the entire world. Spykman argued that the Rimland was an independent political zone separated by lack of communication and transport technologies from Mackinder's Heartland, and conceptually contrasted to it. Yet he overlooked the impact of technological advances, including air power, on the Rimland/Heartland relations. Interestingly, all of the 'great powers' that Spykman identified, including the United States, Britain, Russia, Germany and Japan, were positioned outside the Rimland, but projected their power onto it.<sup>47</sup> Geopolitical conditions made of the Rimland a 'buffer zone', a frontier area between the Sea and Land powers, rather than an area of independent power. This point seems to be the main difference between the Rimland and Lattimore's frontier zone. In other words, whereas for Lattimore the frontier population was endowed with political agency, the Rimland population was instrumental to the great powers' geopolitical balance of power and lacked own decision-making power. Evidently, Spykman perpetuated an imperial view of world order, in which hegemonic power acquired direct or indirect control of areas of strategic interest, largely in disregard of local communities.

---

<sup>46</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 40; Michael P. Gerace, 'Between Mackinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, Containment and After', *Comparative Strategy* 10 (1991), 347–364.

<sup>47</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 41.

In the 1940s, the cartographic imagery of the world underwent significant change: new projections aimed at representing the world from different, previously ignored, geographic viewpoints to important political consequences.<sup>48</sup> For Spykman, cartographic imagery plays a central role in understanding the political world through the concept of 'Encirclement': if the Old World is placed at the centre of the map, as in the traditional Mercator projection, it is 'encircled' by the American coasts. If, on the other hand, the map is centered on the New World, following the Miller projection as he suggested, the Old World's Eurasian coasts could 'encircle' it. In his eyes, the active position of the embracing power is better than the passive 'encircled': the new cartographic projection served to alert the Americans to their possible 'encirclement' by hostile powers. For Spykman the geopolitical position of the United States - facing three oceans, the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Arctic, and spreading its influence over its two 'extensions' (Canada and Latin America) - endowed it with a special global leadership role. Thus, the United States was 'the most important political unit in the "New World"', and should create the postwar world order according to its own notion of 'balance of power'.<sup>49</sup> If Spykman's geopolitics was aimed at promoting American interventionist foreign policy the notion of Encirclement pushed the intervention even further. It extended the original Monroe Doctrine to a 'total hemispheric defence', underlining the United States' role as maritime and territorial power leading a region covering more than half the globe.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

<sup>49</sup> Spykman, *America's Strategy*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

The traditional geopolitical discourse of the Land/Sea dichotomy was destabilized in the 1940s by the diffusion of air power for military warfare and civil transport.<sup>51</sup> The growing popularity of and interest in air power gave new impetus to a reconsideration of earlier geopolitical theories. Many thought the ‘traditional’ Land/Sea dichotomy would be broken by air power which would revolutionize the geopolitical perspective of the world.<sup>52</sup> Even Mackinder sought to adjust his Heartland theory to a new conceptual view of the earth that emerged from the human experience of flight.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, while Lattimore and Spykman recognized the revolutionary potential of air power, they did not think flight could have decisive impact on their theories of world order. Rather than revolutionizing the geopolitical conception of the world, air power reinforced existing spatial categories and conceptions. In the 1940s air travel was celebrated for its technological achievements, and the new bird’s-eye view of the earth it offered.<sup>54</sup> Wendell Willkie, the ex-presidential candidate, published in 1942 his best-seller *One World*, an account of his airplane tour around the world and his vision of the world as ‘one’, an indivisible unit whose inhabitants shared a common humanity which would overcome any political divide.<sup>55</sup> For Lattimore, the aerial representations of the Earth highlighted its natural unity, but obfuscated the nuances of human social existence, giving an illusion of geographic spaces empty of political attributes. The world’s territories become pawns in a strategic game, rather than proactive, autonomous

---

<sup>51</sup> Jenifer L. Van Vleck, ‘The “Logic of the Air”: Aviation and the Globalism of the “American Century”’, *New Global Studies* 1 (2007).

<sup>52</sup> One of the most salient examples of this claim is Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea* [1942] (Washington, DC, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Denis E. Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye: a Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore, 2001), 245.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>55</sup> Wendell L. Willkie, *One World* (New York, 1944).

political units. The limits of the aerial viewpoint highlighted the political importance of what happened on the ground.<sup>56</sup>

The emergence of air power is discussed in Lattimore's essay in *A Compass of the World* in 1946.<sup>57</sup> Air power created a new map of the world, in which lines of longitude and latitude were more significant than national territorial borders. The new air technology rendered the Arctic an increasingly important area when flight over the Polar Region replaced the risky air routes over the Pacific Ocean. Yet for Lattimore the importance of air power lay not in the technological achievement, but in its political implications. Air technology was a revolution *in potentia* rather than in practice, until it impacted the world's political structure as a whole. Thus, if only a few Western powers had access to air technology, the imperial world order would not be abolished. A real turning point could be the acquisition of air power by the Asian region, where it could open up landlocked countries to other regions of the world, and facilitate their development as independent political powers. Therefore, Lattimore saw air power not as a defining element of a new 'air age', but as a transitory technology which would shift the world's geopolitical balance from empire to democracy. Technology was to be reinforced by shared consciousness to the political limits of imperial control.<sup>58</sup> Thus, not only was Lattimore not a technological determinist, he was well aware of the crucial role of politics in defining the meaning of technological innovation.

---

<sup>56</sup> See an example of this view in R.E. Harrison and H. W. Weigert, "World View and Strategy", in Weigert and Stefansson, *Compass of the World*, 74–88; Owen Lattimore, *The Situation in Asia* (Boston, 1949).

<sup>57</sup> Lattimore, 'The Inland Crossroads of Asia', in Weigert and Stefansson, *Compass of the World*, 374-394.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

The problem was one of perception as much as technological might. Air technology, and the spatial imaginary of the aerial gaze, exacerbated for Lattimore the pathologies of imperialism, already present in the 'gun-boat' era. Imperialism implied not only specific political practices, but an all-encompassing world order which created a common imagination exemplified in colonial mental maps. Europe, and for that matter the United States as well, observed Asia from boats and airplanes as one massive territory, inhibited by hostile yet indistinguishable tribes and 'races'. This infinite land was 'empty' of politics because from the shore, or from the air, the foreign rulers could not identify the continent's complex political structures. They presumed its population lacked interest in establishing a system of political control, or in participating in politics in the same manner that an educated European or American citizen would. Lattimore advanced an epistemic critique of Willkie's account, which emphasized shared and universal human values. He highlighted the importance of direct, detailed knowledge of the different modes of social organization and political interaction in local Asian societies, to formulating political thought. This form of knowledge was available only to those who travel and explore the Asian land masses.

Lattimore thus differed significantly from those who announced the coming of the Air Age. In denouncing the potential of air power to carry on the obsolete practices of empire, Lattimore implicitly criticized the wide-spread American conception of air power. Influential figures like Clare Boothe Luce, a pioneering air traveler, Republican politician and the wife of publisher Henry Luce, construed air power as a means to extend American influence around the world without resorting to actual imperial conquest. Air power could complement sea power to guarantee American interests world-wide, since there were 'no more distant places'.<sup>59</sup> As Van Vleck notes, this was not a new approach: since the 1920s air

---

<sup>59</sup> Van Vleck, 'The "Logic of the Air"', 23.

power was seen as a way to facilitate imperial control of the colonial periphery. Some wartime commentators went as far as calling America an 'aerial empire'. 'Empire of the air' slowly became a catchphrase in the popular imagination of America's global role; this was the precise idea that Lattimore hoped to eradicate.

Spykman was even more doubtful of the political importance of air power as an independent, politically relevant technology. He thought air power was ineffective in connecting the Rimland to the land mass. He accepted that warfare had become 'truly tri-dimensional' but did not think that air power could be more than an auxiliary of land and sea powers. Air technology could be politically revolutionary if it could overcome the natural barriers which previously hampered transportation and communication and condemned some regions to political isolation.<sup>60</sup> In 1944 he refuted the claims promoted by Lattimore and geographer Vilhjalmur Stefansson that air power could, under certain conditions, radically change world politics. He did not think that warfare and political control could be based on air power alone.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless it is surprising that Spykman ignored the potential capacity of air power to easily connect the Rimland and the Heartland, which he considered technologically and politically detached. A closer Rimland/Heartland relationship would have rendered sea-based political control irrelevant and undermined the independence of the littoral zones, challenging much of Spykman's strategy.<sup>62</sup> In 1944 technical limitations, like the need for fueling stations and landing bases encouraged Spykman to overlook the destabilizing potential of air power in the framework of his tripolar strategy.

---

<sup>60</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 'The North American Arctic', in *Compass of the World* (New York, 1946), 215–265; Lattimore, 'The Inland Crossroads of Asia'.

<sup>62</sup> Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*.

The air power brings to the fore the disagreement between Lattimore and Spykman on the issue of empire. Since the war emphasized the decline of the European empires, a new world order would have to take into account the transition towards decolonization in Asia and Africa. Lattimore's geopolitics emerged as a critique of empire, proposing a more collaborative scheme of interstate relations to eschew the mentality of imperial power politics. By contrast, Spykman sought to replace the European empires with American power, and argued that America's military bases in the Pacific were essential to prevent the ascendancy of Russia and China, the two new rising powers of the 1940s. Lattimore discarded Spykman's ideas as an old-fashioned approach:

an inability to get away from the obsessions of the past hundred years. [...] for the last one hundred years, an enormously important area of the world, the Asiatic half of what the German geopoliticians call the "Eurasian land mass", the greatest continuous mass of land on the earth's surface, has been dominated, partly for geographical reasons and partly for technological reasons, by the nations which had sea power.<sup>63</sup>

For Lattimore the new land-based world order meant that the imperial age of the "gun-boat" was over and consequently the coastal frontier would be replaced by the land frontier between Russia and China. Spykman on the other hand argued that the coastal areas, in his words the 'Rimland', would maintain prime importance as a frontier area, and remain a central part of sea and land based strategic defense. This difference had important impact on their global strategy. For Lattimore, once imperialism was eclipsed, 'the things that will happen along [the Russia-China] land frontier, far beyond the reach of any American gunboat or battleship, or airplane carrier or air base specified by the most ambitious

---

<sup>63</sup> Owen Lattimore, *America and Asia: Problems of Today's War and the Peace* (Claremont, Calif., 1943), 35.

American Centuryite, are of greater significance than anything that will happen in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>64</sup> However, for Spykman, a geopolitical vision which focused on either Land supremacy or Sea domination was unbalanced because the real focal point of international politics was in the area of their encounter. The Rimland became hub for imperial interaction, and the focal point of American foreign policy.

#### 4. The Geopolitics of Scale

Geography and technology influenced the conception of space in yet another way: by making political thinkers reconsider the notion of ‘power’ through the geopolitical concept of ‘scale’. Considerations of ‘scale’, in particularly regarding the desirable size of states, were part of international thought since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, wartime thinkers argued that a reflection on ‘scale’ was necessary because technological innovations changed the relations between time and space, potentially influencing the ‘balance of power’ in the world. For Spykman ‘all civilized life rests in the last instance on power’, which he defined as the ‘the ability to move men’. Politics was concerned with increasing the state’s power, and not with ‘justice, fairness and tolerance.’ He recognized that political power could a means to an ethical end, but simultaneously tried to divorce the notion of political international ‘power’ from ‘morality’, which was for him a ‘world of dreams’.<sup>66</sup> Yet for Spykman ‘power’

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>65</sup> Georgios Varouxakis, ‘Great’ versus ‘small’ nations: scale and national greatness in Victorian political thought’ in Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics*, 11–18, 7.

should not be discussed in moral but in geopolitical terms. Both he and Lattimore agreed that 'the ability to move man' could be exercised better in large scale political spaces, arguing that small states could not resist the pressure from their stronger neighbors and would have to integrate into the larger polity, voluntarily or not:<sup>67</sup>

a world order that is both progressive and stable must include the concept of large Asiatic states, each of which is politically free and each of which has its political and economic system centered in the heart of its own territory, reaching out from the centre to defend and control the land frontiers and the coasts and ports.<sup>68</sup>

Warning against a repetition of the unsuccessful post-war settlement of 1919, Lattimore and Spykman argued that small states were politically undesirable. They undermined the principle of national self-determination for the sake of international peaceful political equilibrium. Their attitude shows that by the time the United States engaged in global war the Wilsonian ethos of national self-determination was not the main concern in the eyes of the American public and policymakers.<sup>69</sup> In the air age, Spykman argued, only large states could be powerful enough to sustain air, sea and land-based warfare.<sup>70</sup> Smaller states without the demographic, geopolitical and natural resources to wage tri-dimensional war could only exist as 'buffer states' under the protection of larger states, in a system based on the principle of 'balance of power': '[t]he existence of a buffer state is an indication of a system of approximately balanced forces.'<sup>71</sup> In 1941 he discussed the international implications of his

---

<sup>67</sup> Lattimore, 'The Inland Crossroads of Asia', 387; Spykman, *America's Strategy*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Lattimore, 'The Inland Crossroads of Asia', 382.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London, 2012), chap. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas John Spykman, 'Frontiers, Security, and International Organization', *Geographical Review* 32 (1942), 438.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

interpretation of power: the international sphere was characterized by a struggle for power, and each state aimed to protect its independence and the integrity of its territory.<sup>72</sup> The struggle for power was for him a continuous historical phenomenon resulting from the impossibility of attaining absolute 'order' or 'anarchy' in the intrinsically dynamic and changeable international sphere.<sup>73</sup> The authority of a political power was circumscribed to a physical territory, but could also be 'projected' beyond the state's borders to pursue its foreign policy goals of political independence and territorial integrity.<sup>74</sup> Spykman found a solution in geopolitics: collective security could be effective only if the members of the international society were all approximately of equal strength. 'Map makers of the postwar world should try to avoid as much as possible great inequality in power potential'.<sup>75</sup>

Evidently both Spykman and Lattimore proclaimed a regional world order, yet Spykman's was more in line with American priorities at the time, and resonated to a certain extent with the regional plan proposed by the Assistant Secretary of State for American Republic Affairs Nelson Rockefeller at the Dumbarton Oaks conference in 1944. At the Georgetown conference, two American visions for world order emerged: a system of regional blocs promoted by Rockefeller, and a universal institutional vision advanced by the Brookings Institution's Leo Pasvolsky.<sup>76</sup> Eventually, Pasvolsky's proposal prevailed, and the United Nations Organization was founded on universal not regional principles. Yet the debate between Rockefeller and Pasvolsky reflects a wider American debate on postwar

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>73</sup> Spykman, *America's Strategy*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Spykman, 'Frontiers, Security, and International Organization', 440.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>76</sup> Mazower, *Governing the World*, 204.

order to which Spykman contributed. While Rockefeller's global vision was based on regional alliances and cooperation pacts, Spykman's unabashedly focused on extending American power in its geopolitical region, which would for him overlap with the whole Western hemisphere.<sup>77</sup> Spykman used frontiers to parcel the world into states and regions of equal powers, because 'the frontier determines the power potential of the territory it surrounds.' How could this be done? How could 'power' be evaluated and measured in order to parcel territories equally? *America's Strategy* presents quantitative research in politics, based on empirical data and statistics, to evaluate the power potentials of a given territory, and thus formulate political strategy on the basis of calculable parameters like geography, climate, resources and demography. However, since these factors were not static or equally distributed, an artificial territorial division would be desirable but impractical. A solution could only be found if the political scientist and the geographer joined forces to formulate 'legal provisions for sanctions that harmonize with the distribution of power'.<sup>78</sup> His conclusion, giving the final word in international affairs to politicians, rejected interwar legalistic internationalism which grounded collective security in international institutions such as the League of Nations, where legal solutions were prioritized over political ones.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Gisela Cramer and Ursula Prutsch, 'Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs and the Quest for Pan-American Unity: An Introductory Essay', in *iAméricas Unidas!: Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940-46)*, ed. Gisela Cramer and Ursula Prutch (Madrid, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Spykman, 'Frontiers, Security, and International Organization', 447.

<sup>79</sup> The historical interpretation of the League of Nations as a legalistic project has recently been challenged by Wertheim, who argued that the League was conceived as a political – rather than juristic – international organization. This, however, was not necessarily the way the League of Nations was understood in the 1940s, when it was often criticized for prioritizing legal over political solutions. See Stephen Wertheim, 'The League of Nations: a Retreat from International Law?', *Journal of Global History* 7 (2012), 210–232.

Spykman called for a return to a *political* world order overtly based on the existing regional balance of power.

The 'balance of power' is, according to Richard Little, an ambiguous metaphor transformed into a myth which describes, or distorts, international politics.<sup>80</sup> Little suggests that it helps us to think of the notion of 'power' through the concept of 'balance'. The mental image that accompanies the traditional version of the 'balance of power' metaphor is the weighing scale. Yet Spykman offered an alternative image grounded in geopolitics. He used this metaphor to create an imaginary space of politics that is not defined by the image of a scale, but by a geopolitical map which translated 'power' into territorial terms. An international redistribution of power could be achieved, at least theoretically, by parceling the world's territory into units of equal power. 'Balance of power' operated through geopolitical methods like boundary-making, alliances, spheres of influence, compensation, and war. The territorial metaphor of equilibrium outlined on a new cartographic projection of the world and highlighted the close relations between the political and the geographic dimensions of the state. Spykman unfolded political relations in terms of territoriality and spatial control; by using metaphorical and visual instruments he was able to put forward a new conception of tripolarity as the basis for international politics.

## **5. The Frontier in international relations**

The spatial concept of the 'frontier' played a pivotal role in the political imagination of Spykman and Lattimore. Bearing a geographic, symbolic and political meaning, it became the

---

<sup>80</sup> Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge, 2007), 10–18.

political space created by the territorial division and encounter of two different political and social entities. Importantly, each of the thinkers used the geopolitical frontier to justify a different political goal: for Lattimore anti-imperialism and for Spykman American interventionism. The frontier theory remains Lattimore's most recognized contributions to historical and anthropological scholarship, although its strategic or political importance is now lost.<sup>81</sup> The frontier, an area rather than a line, gives order to the entire political system.<sup>82</sup> The frontier is not a demarcating outline of the political unit, but a physical, conceptual and political zone of struggle and interaction, of both local and international importance. Since Lattimore thought that socio-political ideas and norms penetrated the territory from its frontiers towards the centre, the frontier population became the political vanguard for the entire political unit.<sup>83</sup> In the American imagination, the 'frontier' was mostly tied with the thesis advanced by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893.<sup>84</sup> This thesis was fundamentally important for creating the myth of American democracy: for Turner the 'moving frontier line' was the practical and political reason for the development of the American conception of liberty, as distinct from the European political traditions. Free from

---

<sup>81</sup> Lattimore's frontier theory was applied by historians and anthropologists to various geopolitical realities. For example: M. Nazif Mohib Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War* (Washington, DC, 2002); C.R. Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (London, 2004); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn., 2009).

<sup>82</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Inner Asian Frontiers: Chinese and Russian Margins of Expansion", in *Studies in Frontier History* [1947], 134-6, Owen Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," in *Studies in Frontier History* [1955], 470.

<sup>83</sup> Weigert and Stefansson, *Compass of the World*, 393.

<sup>84</sup> Fredrick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" [1893] in Turner, *The Frontier in American History*. For a historical account of the concept of 'frontier' in American history see Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999) Klein briefly mentioned Lattimore's contribution to frontier theory, but provided no discussion of his writings, 193.

binding social and economic relations, the frontier land was free to be taken by the American pioneers. Turner's influential writings paved the way for a long-term American interest in the frontier as geopolitical myth: even Lattimore's friend, Vice-President Henry Wallace, published his version of the 'frontier thesis'.<sup>85</sup> Yet for Lattimore Turner's frontier was as a symbol of expansion and conquest: after all, the American continent was not an empty space, and it should not be forgotten that its native peoples lost their life and territory in the encounter with the pioneers.<sup>86</sup> Conceptually, whereas for Turner at the end of the westbound expansion process the geographic frontier disappeared into the Pacific Ocean and lost its geopolitical importance, for Lattimore the frontier would remain a defining political factor because it depended not only on geography, but also on the society and the state which construed it. Lattimore argued that Turner's thesis was limited by its focus on the frontier as the zone of *geographic* encounter between the European immigrant and the American wilderness. Instead, he suggested a more holistic, structural view taking into account the institutional and cultural factors which characterized and motivated the social exchange in the frontier zone. For him, each society required and perpetuated the concept of 'frontier', and the necessary 'other' on its opposite side, to define its own identity.

The political space of the frontier is better illustrated, for Lattimore, by the vast Asian land frontier, stretching from Turkey to Korea. Unlike the American frontier, this was a geographic space of cultural interaction and a hub of national movements. James Scott's reading of Lattimore emphasizes the contention between the agricultural plane and the pastoral hills populations, and the fundamental importance of the relations between the human and the natural in creating the political sphere. Lattimore saw the nomadic social

---

<sup>85</sup> H. A. Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York, 1934).

<sup>86</sup> Lattimore, 'The Frontier in History', 489.

order, which escaped the control of the territorial state, as a complex developed social system, unlike most interpreters who conceived the transition from agriculture to nomadism as social deterioration. The populations of the frontier zone, like the Mongols, Uzbeks and – in Scott’s research – the Zomia highlanders, created a pluralistic, unstable and amorphous political space that was characterized by ‘low-stateness’. Lattimore and Scott alike saw this unique political reality as a counterbalance to the western conception of the state as a territorially-fixed entity. It allowed a more flexible and versatile interpretation of the territorial space of political action and participation.<sup>87</sup> For Lattimore this entailed an interpretation of liberty based on a versatile, nomadic political space, which Scott later elaborated into a complex theory of nomadic anarchism. Lattimore, unlike Scott, did not necessarily consider the peoples of the inner Asian hills as promoters of an anarchical interpretation of politics, but he did think flexible nomadic system was endowed with greater freedom than the fixed territorial state. Thus, the nomadic populations of the frontier zone could decide whether to ‘descend’ to the agricultural planes and participate in the territorial political community, or maintain their pastoral liberty. The hill peoples were not anarchic but promoters of a different kind of order, characterized by pluralism and instability.

Spykman offered a different interpretation of the ‘frontier’ in world order. In a speech given at the joint session of the Association of American Geographers and the American Political Science Association on 31 December 1941, he argued that the Americans would be given the task of formulating a postwar ‘new world order’ based on the ‘usual components’ of world politics: boundaries, territorial security and international organization. In this speech, delivered weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Spykman outlined his spatial vision of postwar order, and the role of the United States in it. He rebuffed as out-

---

<sup>87</sup> James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 172-3, 210.

dated the legalistic universalistic notions of 'order', which sought to construct a universal juridical framework applicable worldwide. Political power would continue to reside in territorial states whose dynamic struggle for power would outlive the war. By consequence, war and conflict could not be avoided, only limited.

In these circumstances, his geopolitical theory evolved from what he considered to be the state's most important feature: its territoriality. The state's territoriality gives prime importance to the 'imaginary line' of the 'boundary', which is 'not only a line of demarcation between legal systems but also a point of contact for territorial power structures. From the long term point of view, the location of that line may indicate the power relations of the contending forces.'<sup>88</sup> Thus, for Spykman the frontier theory was an opportunity to discuss power relations: frontiers are used to delimit a state's power potential.<sup>89</sup> The cultural, ethnic or economic importance of the frontier areas is completely absent from this account that regards frontiers as one of the instruments available to the sovereign state to control flows of people and goods into and from its territory.

The Rimland was also an extended frontier zone, the dividing area between the Sea and the Land powers, a geopolitical mega-frontier that complemented the importance of the political frontiers between states. In order to achieve a powerful position in the world, the United States would have to 'project' its political influence on the Rimland. Spykman extended the Monroe Doctrine, which defined American foreign policy in its sphere of interests, to the entire Western hemisphere. The impact of contending powers could be limited, and the United States could potentially become a leading international not regional

---

<sup>88</sup> Nicholas John Spykman, 'Frontiers, Security, and International Organization', *Geographical Review* 32 (1942), 437.

<sup>89</sup> Spykman, 'Frontiers, Security, and International Organization'.

power.<sup>90</sup> This idea was supported also by the interpretation of the Rimland as a frontier zone between the United States and its rivals, especially Soviet Russia, the British Empire and Japan. For Spykman, the extension of the American frontier beyond the oceans, to Asia and Europe, created a new foreign policy based on active intervention, serving his political goal of ending American isolationism.

In contrast to Lattimore's frontier, which constructed a zone of interaction, Spykman's strategic and divisive frontier created new impetus for potentially imperial intervention in the name of regional defence. The revival and extension of the Monroe Doctrine, that became increasingly popular in American political thought at the time, was not shared by Lattimore. For him, this was the emblem of the negative and destructive aspects of the imperial order: the paradoxical combination of self-interested intervention in the colonial world, and international policy of isolationism embodied the worst of American foreign policy. As we will now see, this pattern in foreign policy was exactly what his vision of world order hoped to eradicate.

## 6. Tripolarity

It is a truism to note that the position of the United States in the Western Hemisphere conditions American foreign policy, and more generally the American outlook on world politics. Yet for Spykman, unlike many of his contemporaries, this geopolitical factor had a specific ideological implication: it revised and reinterpreted the American Monroe Doctrine, directing policymakers away from isolationism towards a politics of

---

<sup>90</sup> Dexter Perkins, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine* (London, 1941); Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-century America*, (New York, 2011).

intervention in world affairs. Isolationism was a common (but contested) political position in the United States since the First World War.<sup>91</sup> Both Spykman and Lattimore sought to reverse this trend, each for his own reason. Their solution was to outline a tripolar world order, in which the New World was seen as one power region in the world, the ‘Western Hemisphere’, while the Old World constituted two power regions: Europe and the Asia. In each region there can be only one great power which sets the terms of the political game. Interestingly, Lattimore shared Spykman’s commitment to the tripolar thesis with the United States and the USSR as two power poles, but there was no agreement on the third component: a democratic Asia for Lattimore, or British-led Europe for Spykman. If the struggle between ‘democracy’ and ‘empire’ was already hinted in the prewar world, the war exacerbated the divisive tendencies. The growing American skepticism of Britain and France’s ability to uphold their empire after the war was interpreted very differently by Lattimore and Spykman: the first enthusiastically announced the end of the imperial order, while the latter invited the United States to take the place of the European empires in defence of Western civilization.<sup>92</sup> Thus, they offered two very different conclusions to the geopolitical approach to postwar world order.

Innovations in cartography are essential to understand how tripolarity was embedded in Lattimore’s and Spykman’s assumptions about political space. In the 1940s new world maps, based on innovative projections, became available and helped them articulate their visions in geopolitical terms. Spykman suggested that the idea of political tripolarity could

---

<sup>91</sup> John Thompson, ‘The geopolitical vision: the myth of an outmatched U.S.A.’ in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>92</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge, 2012), 154–160.

only be understood by looking at a specific kind of maps. *America's Strategy* included color maps by the famous American cartographer Richard Edes Harrison, with detailed explanations of the advantages of the projections used to illustrating political changes in the world. The Miller and Gall projections – rather than the previously dominant Mercator projection - offered a distortion-free perception of the world illustrating the strategic implications of geopolitical changes.<sup>93</sup> Lattimore also included maps of central Asia in his books as an immediate representation of the political relevance of the ‘great frontier’. The novelty of their visions was not necessarily rooted in new physical geographic realities. Rather, it was a combination of political ideas on empire, new transport and communication technologies, and innovative cartographic representations that created their tripolar geopolitical spaces. Cosgrove suggests that in the 1940s new cartographic publications manifested the growing importance of spatial representations in shaping the new global role of the United States.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Spykman and Lattimore thought that their spatial conceptions, emerging from new representations of the observable empiric world, implied implicit normative claim that American isolationism was no longer viable. It is telling that despite their different assumptions on political agency, both argued that interventionism was the only strategy which could carve an adequate postwar space for the United States: as a new kind of imperial power for Spykman, or as an anti-imperial liberator for Lattimore.

Why did Spykman and Lattimore promote a *tripolar* world order? In the same years the tripolar vision could have seem a natural outcome of the victorious war alliance. Others, like the French philosopher Raymond Aron and the British writer George Orwell also

---

<sup>93</sup> Susan Schulten, ‘Richard Edes Harrison and the Challenge to American Cartography’, *Imago Mundi* 50 (1998), 174–188; Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago, 2002).

<sup>94</sup> Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye*, 244-251.

envisaged a world divided into three regions.<sup>95</sup> By 1977 the ‘tripolarity’ school of thought, centered on Russia, the United States and China, has been recognized and discussed by political scientists as a viable if complicated political alternative to bipolarity.<sup>96</sup> However, these ideas of tripolarity lack the conceptual geopolitical background Lattimore and Spykman offered. For them, tripolar order could reflect the postwar geopolitical reality (which Spykman did not see as he died in 1943), but could also guarantee a degree of regional diversity which a universal legal solution would undermine. In 1941, Spykman thought the postwar world would not differ substantially from the prewar world: a world of sovereign states struggling to maintain their territorial integrity and political independence. Yet these states would no longer be united in a legal international order governed by a world organization like the League of Nations. They would be politically organized in three great regions of roughly the same geopolitical ‘power’, each led by one, preferably democratic, hegemonic power.<sup>97</sup> Lattimore’s proposal was geopolitically similar but substantially different: he hoped the Asian ‘Third World’ could put an end to Soviet-American antagonism, as well as to imperial domination, by offering a political and economic alternative ‘middle way’. What they did have in common was a call for American intervention in world affairs, which was nonetheless motivated by conflicting views of the global legitimacy of imperialism.

Lattimore’s critique of imperialism pushed him to envisage Asia as a source of democratic political power in the postwar world. He pointed to a free and democratic China

---

<sup>95</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Longman Study Texts (Harlow, 1983); Raymond Aron, *L’homme Contre Les Tyrans*, (Paris, 1946).

<sup>96</sup> Joseph L. Noguee and John W. Spanier, ‘The Politics of Tripolarity’, *World Affairs* 139 (1977), 319–333.

<sup>97</sup> Spykman, *America’s Strategy*, 461.

as a future regional leader, alongside Russia and the United States. 'I think China is still perhaps the most important single area. There have been people who have spoken of the years to come after the war as the "American Century". Perhaps it is more likely that the next hundred years will be the Chinese Century.'<sup>98</sup> Although such a statement would not seem out of place today, in the 1940s the major public debate revolved around the idea of an 'American Century', announced by Henry Luce in an influential article in *Life*, just two years before Lattimore proclaimed the 'Chinese Century'.<sup>99</sup> Luce argued, not unlike Spykman, that the American Century ended the United States' isolation, and marked its entrance into world politics as a leading power. It was the beginning of a new age not only in American history, but in the history of the world as a whole.<sup>100</sup>

Lattimore hoped that China's rising to global importance would mark the end of imperialism as the defining category of political space. The Chinese leadership depended not only on factors of power, but also on a moral claim: China would offer a new model for freedom and democracy. The idea of the 'Chinese Century' celebrated potentially democratic China as a new partner in a democratic world politics, the leader of the 'Third World', against European and American imperial tendencies.<sup>101</sup> The 'Third World', a term which Lattimore first used in 1948, was not only a vanguard plan for regional democracy, but also an experimental playground for a compromise between the American and the Russian models, especially in economics. The local Asian traditions and cultures would develop an autochthonous version of democracy as a midway between capitalism and collectivism, to

---

<sup>98</sup> Lattimore, *America and Asia*, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Henry Luce, 'The American Century', *Life*, (17 February 1941); Smith, *American Empire*, xvii.

<sup>100</sup> Donald W. White, 'The "American Century" in World History', *Journal of World History* 3 (1992), 105–127.

<sup>101</sup> Owen Lattimore, 'International Chess Game', *New Republic* 112 (28 May 1945), 731–3.

defeat the American-Soviet binary. Thus, the ‘Chinese Century’ announced the emergence of a new political age, but also of a new economic system, which differed from imperial traditions by expunging exploitation and inequality. This ‘Third World’ economic system, interestingly, shared some basic assumptions with early theories of the welfare state, since for Lattimore a semi-regulated free-market state would not ‘protect profits at the expense of human rights’.<sup>102</sup>

### **Conclusion: Geopolitics and the postwar political space**

In 1942, Kurt R. Mattusch of the American State Department criticized the nascent American geopolitical thought in an article in the left-leaning journal *Amerasia*.<sup>103</sup> Mattusch argued that ‘in a global war, space has a new meaning’, and that new spatial reality meant a new universalism, based on Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms and on economic cooperation. Despite the superficiality of his criticism he grasped a grain of truth: in the postwar study of international relations in the United States, political ideologies and abstract economic theories gained prominence. The interest in geopolitics was in decline.

The global visions of Lattimore and Spykman used the spatial terminology of geopolitics to conceptualize potential postwar political innovations. Both promoted regional – rather than universal – solutions, and justified them in geopolitical terms. Lattimore’s tripolar order replaced empire with democracy as the founding principle of international relations, emphasizing the importance of self rule, popular participation and political liberty as the foundation of democratic order. Spykman was less concerned with democracy than

---

<sup>102</sup> Lattimore, *The Situation in Asia*, 223.

<sup>103</sup> Kurt Mattusch, ‘Geopolitics - “Science” of Power Politics’, *Amerasia* 6 (1942), 236.

with global hegemony, and he sought to refashion the US as a world political leader implicitly building upon the existing experience of empire while delegitimizing it outwardly. Both thought that decolonization in Asia gave impetus to their visions, rendering them timely, relevant and desirable.

However, by 1950 their ideas became marginalized within American discourse on foreign policy and the nascent discipline of IR. Spykman is still sometimes described as one of the earliest ‘realist’ thinkers (though the term remains vague and contested) and is credited for inspiring his Yale colleagues Dunn and Wolfers, who played a pivotal role in shaping the American IR discipline.<sup>104</sup> Lattimore’s scholarship is rarely associated today with international relations, politics or strategic studies. In way of conclusion, I will briefly outline five reasons for the limited impact of their political visions, and possibly of geopolitics in general, on IR scholarship. The first evident cause is personal: Spykman died in 1943 and Lattimore was ostracized from academia and the public sphere when Sen. Joseph McCarthy prosecuted him for Anti-Americanism.<sup>105</sup> The second factor is the atomic revolution. In 1945, after the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, the perception of political space changed radically: time and space became irrelevant.<sup>106</sup> It was the nuclear bomb, and not air power, that rendered the world truly ‘one’, as Wendell Willkie wanted it. The nuclear revolution resulted in the rise of universalism over regionalism as the key principle for a new

---

<sup>104</sup> Nicolas Guilhot, ‘Introduction: One Discipline, Many Histories’ in Guilhot, *The Invention*, 27. Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven, Conn., 2002), 179–181. See also Vitalis, “review of David Ekbladh”, *H-Diplo*, 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Lattimore’s full acquittal did not restore his political and scholarly reputation in the United States.

<sup>106</sup> Matthew Farish, *The Contours of America’s Cold War* (Minneapolis, 2010), chap. 1; Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, 2013), chap. 11.

global order, and dictated also the kind of postwar international organizations that the Allied powers saw as desirable. The third reason is embodied in the emergence of the Cold War ideology, mentality and foreign policy, especially after the Korea War and the Chinese Civil War. Although the extent and impact of the Cold War could not have been foreseen by the geopolitical thinkers in the early 1940s, their spatial visions were definitely compromised by the rise of bipolarity. Consequently, a fourth reason is the renewed emphasis on political ideology and abstract economic theories that undermined the importance of territoriality and geography. The foundation of the United Nations Organization, the Declaration of Human Rights, and the establishment of international economic institutions contributed to reinforcing the universalist view of world politics over the regional one. The fifth reason was, paradoxically, the decolonization trend that strengthened the centrality of the state. Despite Lattimore's supportive attention to Asian anti-colonial movements, he did not foresee their insistence on the political structure of the state as vehicle of political freedom, and overemphasized the liberating capacities of a supranational world order. Lattimore and Spykman envisaged regional political space that ignored the two defining spatial ideas of the postwar era: the universalism of economics and ideologies, and the particular space of the state. As a consequence, their world order visions lost political relevance, and was excluded of from the scholarship and mainstream historiography of international relations in the United States.