

# A Comparative Geopolitical Study of Heartland and Rimland Theories in Shaping National Security Strategies

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## Abstract

Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory, and Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory are two of the most influential Geopolitical Frameworks; both emphasize that control of either Eurasia's interior (Heartland) or its coastal periphery (Rimland) will provide the basis for achieving global dominance. This Review Paper compares the ways that four of the largest states in the world -- the United States, Russia, China and India -- use Heartland and Rimland Theory concepts within the context of their National Security Strategies and Strategic Planning processes. To address the primary Research Question: "How do the four large states apply Heartland and Rimland concepts in their strategic planning?" The Review Paper analyzes alignments based on documented Policy Documents and academic Literature to compare how the four large states align with each other as related to Heartland/Rimland Theory; for example, the United States has used an Offshore Balancing strategy in the Rimland; Russia is attempting to consolidate control of the Heartland; China is using Hybrid Approaches; and India has assumed the role of Balancer between the two. The Review Paper identifies several findings related to the ways that the four large states have adapted classical deterministic theory in response to the realities of a multipolar world, including the integration of new variables (technology and economics). However, there are also critiques of the limitations of these theories in today's globalized world. Yet, despite the many changes in the international system since they were developed, these theories continue to be important influences in the development of the security posture of the four large states. Overall, this Comparative Assessment illustrates the continued relevance of Geopolitical Theories in the current era of Great Power Competition.

**Keywords:** Comparative Study, Geopolitical Theories, Heartland, Rimland, Mackinder, Spykman, Eurasia, Security Strategies.

## Introduction

Theories of Geopolitics serve as frameworks by which we can examine the role that geography plays in shaping State behavior and strategies for securing interests. Mackinders Heartland Theory posited the Eurasian land mass as an important arena for the concentration of World Power, whereas Spykmans Rimland Theory shifted focus to the coastal regions surrounding the heartland as barriers to expansion by a potential Heartland Power (Pickering, 2017; Knutsen, 2014). In today's environment of multipolar Global Governance, both theories continue to influence the foreign policies of nation-states often in an indirect manner through the formation of alliances, the placement of military assets, and the establishment of economic programs (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022; Gerace, 1991).

## Research Question & Methodology

This paper seeks to answer the primary research question: How do major States (the U.S., Russia, China, India) explicitly or implicitly utilize these theories when developing their strategic plans? By examining each of these States' applications of the theory of geopolitical strategy, this paper examines whether they support a defensive posture vis-a-vis the Heartland or contain the threat of a potential Heartland Power by supporting a Rimland posture. A comprehensive review of prior research was conducted in order to synthesize historical context, policy analysis and academic critique of how these theories have influenced the development of security doctrine among major powers, thereby contributing to the discourse of adaptive geopolitics. This paper concludes that while few references are made to either theory within official documents, many countries use the underlying principles of each to develop responses to emerging global issues.

## Overview of Heartland and Rimland Theories

Mackinder's theory, "The Geographical Pivot of History," is a 1904 analysis that identifies a large Eurasian continent, specifically Central Asia and the Russian Empire as the "geographical pivot of history." The heartland is located in an interior position, thus enabling it to control its neighbors through defense and internal mobility. Mackinder stated that railroads would allow the unification of the region against sea powers; he stressed land power. The theory of the rimland, developed by Spykman in 1944, is a contrasting view that focuses on the coastal periphery of states. According to the rimland theory, the ability to use amphibious warfare combined with alliances in the periphery can prevent the heartland from being used as a base of operations by other nations and thereby maintain world dominance (Gerace, 1991).

The two theories are different in terms of emphasis, and the emphasis will be different. Mackinder has a focus on how a nation or coalition will utilize the heartland to resist attacks from external forces. Spykman has a focus on how a nation or coalition will use the periphery to attack or defend against attacks from the heartland. These theories represent geographic determinism and have been influential in shaping strategic policy for both empires and the contemporary state. However, while the original theories were based solely on geographic determinants, they now are interpreted in a broader context including new technologies such as cyber warfare, and other non-traditional areas of military conflict.

This overview provides the background information needed to assess their role in national planning.

## Historical Applications in National Security Strategies

The United States has historically employed Rimland strategies by containing the Russian Heartland during the Cold War through its establishment of NATO as an alliance around the Soviet Heartland. As a representative of the Heartland, Russia has pursued buffer zones in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to defend itself (Drew & Nitze, 1994). The People's Republic of China has implicitly used Rimland strategy since the formation of the PRC to obtain access to the oceans through its maritime expansion to counter U.S. encirclement (Chen & Fazilov, 2018).

India is a pivotal Rimland state and has historically maintained balance between the two schools of thought regarding the geography of conflict, i.e. Heartland and Rimland, by employing the policy of non-alignment while maintaining its own chokepoints in the Indian Ocean (Mukhia & Zou, 2022).

Post-Cold War these countries have continued to employ the theories in their evolving security frameworks. The U.S. has transitioned its focus from European to Asian-Pacific Rimland strategy; Russia has reasserted control over its Heartland via the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union; China has advanced its BRI hybrid access strategy; and India has enhanced “Act East” policies (Bordachev et al., 2014; Kukkola & Puranen, 2022; Sum, 2018). These developments demonstrate the theoretical foundations of the two schools of thought are embedded into the strategic thinking of each country.

### **Contemporary Applications in Major States**

#### **United States**

U.S. foreign policies clearly demonstrate alignment with the Rimland Theory through alliances (as outlined by Gerace, 1991), and therefore, can be considered an application of Rimland Theory; these alliances are directed toward containing Chinese and Russian expansion into the Rimland (the areas of land that border the oceans of the world). Additionally, United States foreign policy can be seen as an example of offshore balancing which includes the use of naval forces to protect trade routes from the influence of Heartland nations in the oceanic regions surrounding their lands (Spykman, 1942); the 2022 National Security Strategy outlines U.S. foreign policy partnership objectives for the region of the rimland and for Europe, thus further supporting the idea of the Rimland Theory.

#### **Russia**

While Russia has not explicitly stated its adherence to the Heartland Theory, the country's security doctrine can be viewed as an implicit embodiment of it, as Russia seeks to control and protect the interior of Eurasia by establishing bases of operation in Siberia and partnering with other countries in the area through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Duncan, 2015). Neo-Eurasianist writings have also influenced Russian policy to build a stronger defense of its northern Heartland flank via Arctic fortification, and since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has taken steps to establish a buffer zone between itself and the U.S. and NATO's rimland (Kukkola & Puranen, 2022).

#### **China**

China uses a combination of Rimland and Heartland Theory when developing its foreign policy, but is primarily focused on using Rimland theory, as evidenced by its establishment of a series of artificial islands in the South China Sea and its investment in ports in coastal states around the world (Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI) to provide a greater ability to access the coastal zones of the world (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). However, while the majority of China's foreign policy may be based on Rimland theory, there are indications that it also utilizes aspects of Heartland theory, as it attempts to secure routes across the heart of Eurasia to reduce its reliance on sea-based supply lines (Li et al., 2020). In its 2019 Defense White Paper, China

explicitly describes its national defense strategy as "active defense", which indicates that it will take an active role in defending itself, rather than simply reacting to threats, and this strategy appears to blend the ideas of both Rimland and Heartland theory (Li et al., 2020).

## **India**

As India develops its own foreign policy, it has been taking a position similar to the United States, but in the Indian Ocean, where it is attempting to counter China's "string of pearls" by forming partnerships, including conducting joint naval exercises, known as Malabar exercises, in the region (Juned, 2019). While India is primarily focused on Rimland Theory in the Indian Ocean, it does utilize some of the concepts of Heartland Theory on its borders with China in the Himalayas to help ensure that it maintains its strategic autonomy (Kumar , 2025). As such, the National Security Strategy of India can be viewed as an attempt to maintain a balance between the two competing theories in the emerging competitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Comparative Analysis**

The U.S. tends to emphasize the Rimland strategy, forming alliances with other countries to create a "belt" around the possible Heartland adversaries - Russia and China. Russia has taken the opposite approach, using its military and oil power to assert control over the interior of Eurasia. China uses both strategies in different ways: expanding its Rimland influence and also creating a number of Heartland corridors which can provide the country with some level of security and resilience. India serves as a pivot between the two Rimlands; maintaining an application to each Rimland so as to prevent being trapped by either one.

A counter-thesis to the above geopolitical view exists, and it suggests that foreign policy is shaped by a combination of factors - such as population density, economic structures and government forms - and not just geography (Pickering, 2017). Although many variables exist when attempting to understand foreign policy, studying the geopolitical frameworks of the Heartlands and Rimlands will continue to assist in the development of the broad strategies employed by nations (DIACONESCU & Mazilu, 2022). The above analytic model provides a robust lens for evaluating how governments apply geographic imperatives into their strategic planning processes, regardless of the evolving nature of international relations (Mirza & Ayub, 2022).

While classical geopolitical theories are still valuable today for developing a basic understanding of how governments use geography to achieve their goals, there is much debate regarding the continuing relevance of classical geopolitical theories due to advancements in technology and the increasing degree of global connectivity of economies (Uşiak et al., 2021). However, Mackinder's Heartland theory continues to provide an important framework for the study of competitive geopolitics, especially within the context of the Indian Ocean region, where the relationships of land-based power and naval power continue to become more intertwined (Bakare & Toor, 2019).

The three countries have similar approaches in adapting to multipolarity: they are all using technology and economics in the implementation of their respective strategies. They differ in terms of how overtly they acknowledge the role of geopolitical thinking in their strategic

planning processes. The previous analysis highlights the flexible nature of the theories used by each state and demonstrates how these theories may be integrated into the strategic planning processes of each state. Thus, the analysis addresses the research question through an examination of the various state-specific implementations of the theories.

### **Critiques and Modern Adaptations**

Critics of Heartland and Rimland Theories assert that these geographic theories are overly deterministic and overlook the influences of a variety of other factors (population density, economic structures, government types, etc.) which include new technologies (cyber and space) and could be generating conflict (UŠIÁK ET AL., 2021) including some of the current U.S.-Russian tensions (Pickering, 2017). For example, American geographer M.I. Glassner criticized Mackinder's theory of Heartland for its failure to consider the growing power of the U.S., the internal contradictions in the control of the Heartland demonstrated by the Soviet Union, and the impacts of technological developments (UŠIÁK ET AL., 2021). Critics of the two theories view them as outmoded, due to globalization, and the rise of non-state actors, and feel that both theories have failed to adequately account for U.S. power and the contradictions in the control of the Heartland (UŠIÁK ET AL., 2021). Despite these criticisms, the two theories continue to remain relevant today, albeit in an adapted form, as "networked" models: the United States has integrated digital Rimlands through Indo-Pacific cyber alliances (Gerace, 1991), Russia has strengthened its cyber-Heartlands, while simultaneously establishing Eurasian military bases (DUNCAN, 2015), China is pursuing "digital silk roads," as part of the Belt and Road Initiative to create hybrid geoeconomic access (CHEN AND FAZILOV, 2018; SUM, 2018), and India is emphasizing hybrid defense strategies, integrating maritime Rimland approaches with Himalayan Heartland buffer zones (JUNED, 2019; KUMAR AND ., 2025). These adaptations mitigate the determinism criticism of the two theories, by incorporating non-geographic elements into their frameworks, thus continuing to provide flexible strategic guidance for contemporary strategic planners (Mirza & Ayub, 2022). Further evidence of this ongoing relevance, is the continued influence of Mackinder's ideas on contemporary strategic thought, especially in terms of post-Cold War foreign policy formulations regarding Eurasia (Singh, 2020; Mousinho et al., 2018).

### **Conclusion**

The Heartland and Rimland theories have shaped the United States national security strategy by way of both the direct application of each theory (e.g., containment of a potential threat in the heartland, consolidation of territory in the rimland) and the indirect application of each theory (i.e., the strategic thinking that goes into the United States' national security decisions). Each of the three other countries discussed also apply the same theories, but through different lenses (consolidation for Russia; hybridization for China; and balancing for India). As such, addressing the above-referenced research question, the United States, as well as each of the other three nations, have adapted the classical theories of the heartland and rimland to their respective contemporary challenges and have blended the two (geography + innovation). While critics have argued against determinism because it is an overly simplistic approach to understanding the world, the fact that so many nations continue to utilize and adapt the heartland/rimland framework is evidence of its continued relevance to our world today. Further

research will need to be done to understand how emerging global powers are integrating the heartland and rimland concepts into their own strategic thinking in order to provide a more complete understanding of the current state of geopolitics.

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