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21st century: The return to the struggle for Rimland?

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Abstract:

Classical geopolitics provides a series of analyses and reflections that, in many cases, are somewhat forgotten, as outdated ideas without value in today's world.

In a world plunged into full geopolitical reconfiguration, and in a technological - and pandemic - environment such as the current one, old and new powers dispute, in an underground way in most cases, for the control of one of the planet's key spaces, for the great arc that surrounds the central Eurasian landmass, for the so-called Rimland. And in that space is Europe, or at least a large part of it.

A reflection on the aforementioned struggle and its potential repercussions, as well as a final question, make up this Document.

Keywords:

Rimland, Heartland, containment, Russia, Turkey, China, Silk Road.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Siglo XXI: ¿El retorno a la lucha por el Rimland?

Resumen:

La geopolítica clásica proporciona una serie de análisis y reflexiones que, en muchas ocasiones quedan un tanto olvidadas, como ideas del pasado sin valor en el mundo de hoy.

En un mundo sumido en plena reconfiguración geopolítica, y en un entorno tecnológico –y pandémico- como el actual, viejas y nuevas potencias disputan, de manera soterrada en la mayor parte de los casos, por el control de uno de los espacios claves del planeta, por el gran arco que rodea a la masa continental central euroasiática, por el llamado Rimland. Y en ese espacio se encuentra Europa, o al menos una gran parte de la misma.

Una reflexión al respecto de la citada pugna y de sus potenciales repercusiones, amén de una cuestión final, articulan el presente Documento.

Palabras clave:

Rimland, Tierra Corazón, contención, Rusia, Turquía, China, Ruta de la Seda.

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Introduction: A new era of power struggle!

In an environment marked by the geopolitical reconfiguration of the planet, and at a time when, due to both the rise of "new technologies" and the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that everything is new, everything is different¹, everything is starting from scratch or, at least, we are finding ourselves at a turning point in history without paragon, with hardly any or very few references, and in which all of the above is not valid and does not even serve as a starting point for reflection.

After the end of the bipolar Cold War system, the growing power of non-state actors and their increased capacity to act against states –one need only recall 9/11 and the beginning of the "war on terror" that heralded a new era and the end of "classical disputes"– seemed to put a damper on classical geopolitical theories, it seemed to give wings to the ideas about the end of rivalry between powers, a reality that for centuries had been the driving force and cause of disputes, wars, agreements, alliances, betrayals... Thus, apparently, the quest for hegemony by one nation and the efforts of others to avoid it, or at least to reach a point of balance of power, a balance that was always unstable but for the maintenance of which the efforts of all kinds and across the whole spectrum of strategy (diplomatic, political, informational, intelligence, military, economic, etc.) of the other nations were directed, seemed to be a thing of the past. A new era was dawning.

And if in addition, as in other stages of history, the "Taliban" of one or another tendency², or more or less well-read or interested prophets theorise about the loss of value of all that has gone before on the basis of the novelty –whether it is or not– of the new contested environments –from outer space to the cognitive realm– and "new" terms are coined –

¹ AKON, Saifullah and RAHMAN, Mahfujur, Reshaping the global order in the post-COVID-19 era: a critical analysis, Chinese Journal of International Review, July 2020, DOI: 10.1142/S2630531320500067. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Saifullah-Akon/publication/343098068_Reshaping_the_Global_Order_in_the_Post_COVID-19_Era_A_Critical_Analysis/links/5f6ad340458515b7cf46ebf2/Reshaping-the-Global-Order-in-the-Post-COVID-19-Era-A-Critical-Analysis.pdf?origin=publication_detail. NOTE: All web links in this paper are active as of 17 March 2021.

²In this sense SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, La lucha por el planeta y el futuro de las FAS españolas, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 28/2017, 15 May 2017. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2017/DIEEEO28-2017_Lucha_Planeta_Futuro_FAS_Espanolas_PSH.pdf

such as "influence"³, "grey zone"⁴, "hybrid warfare"⁵... among many others— it could be that a radical interpretation of the "novelties" leads to the feeling that there is indeed no previous parallel for the moment of global contestation in which the planet is immersed.

Therefore, the gradual resurgence of Russia since 2000 —under Putin's leadership—, the take-off of China and its positioning as the world's second largest economy in 2011 and closing the gap in all areas with what is still the world's leading power, the United States of America, added to the growing neo-Ottomanism of Turkey and its desire for expansion, or at least for influence throughout most of the territories of the former Ottoman Empire, in the face, to a certain or great extent, of a relative reduction in the capabilities and perhaps the will of other nations or groups of nations (such as the European Union) to occupy an adequate position in this dispute for "a place under the sun", may generate an environment that has no mimicry of the past.

And perhaps that is so, and nothing from the past can serve as a reference point. Or can it?

Issues of the past!: Rimland?

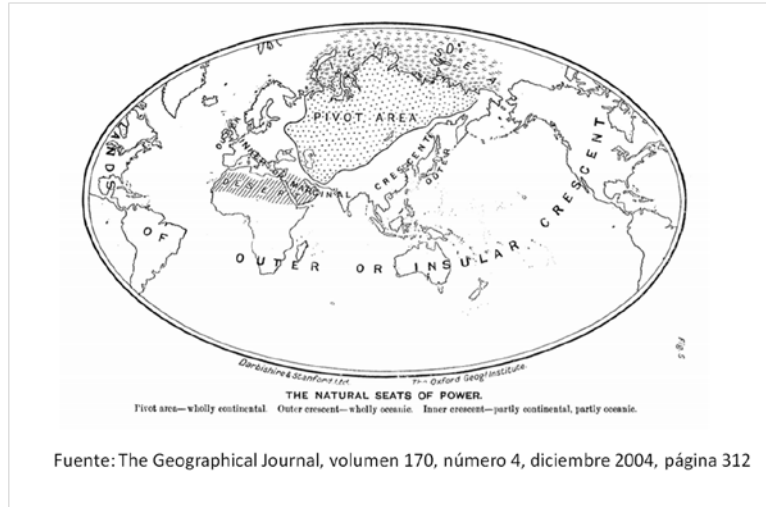
Beyond the age-old dispute between thalassocracies and telurocracies (powers based on maritime and land power respectively), what is certain is that access to the sea confers a competitive advantage on a nation over one that does not possess such a possibility; thus, the search for an outlet to the ocean has been a classic polemological factor, triggering conflicts throughout the history of humanity. And if, in addition, this outlet to the sea is desired from a space that occupies around one sixth of the planet's emerged lands, the situation obviously acquires a global significance and level.

³The power of a person or element to determine or modify the way others think or act. SCANZILLO, Thomas M. and LOPACIENSKI, Edward M., Influence operations and the human domain, U.S. Naval War College, CIWAG Case Studies issue 13, 2015. Available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=814708>

⁴Space between peaceful competition and armed conflict. JORDÁN, Javier, La escalada en las estrategias híbridas y en la zona gris, Global Strategy Report 11/2020. Available at <https://global-strategy.org/la-escalada-en-las-estrategias-hibridas-y-en-los-conflictos-en-la-zona-gris/>

⁵Conflict in which all kinds of means and procedures, both "warlike" and "non-warlike", are employed. SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Comprender la guerra híbrida... ¿El retorno a los clásicos?, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Documento de Análisis 42/2016, 21 June 2016. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2016/DIEEEA42-2016_Comprender_GuerraHibrida_RetornoClasicos_PSH.pdf

This large land mass on the Eurasian continent essentially corresponds to the space occupied by Russia over the centuries in various political organisations since the 18th



century: Russian Empire, Soviet Union (part of it) and Russian Federation. And not only does "size matter", not only is space a power factor, but its relative position on the continent and on the planet came to motivate its definition as a "heartland".

In 1904, the British author Halford J. Mackinder (1861-1947) wrote the work "The geographic pivot of history"⁶ in which—in a simplified form and as can be seen in the attached image—he identified the "island world" (Europe, Asia and Africa) as the essence of world power, and within this vast expanse of land, he defined a "heartland"—also known as the world pivot—(essentially coinciding with the then existing Russian Empire). And he divided the planet into a "pivot area", in essence that planetary heartland, encircled by an arc (proximal or marginal) made up of the lands and waters around it, leaving the rest of the spaces in a defined "outer ring".

The end of World War I (1914-1918), in addition to the demise of four empires, saw a reordering of borders in Europe and much of the Middle East unparalleled in recent history⁷, leading Mackinder not only to indicate that the war had reaffirmed his view but to expand it in a new work⁸, reiterating that the power that occupied and dominated the heartland would dominate the island world, and whoever dominated the island world would dominate the planet. And he added a new element to this global struggle by pointing out that whoever dominated Eastern Europe would dominate the heartland,

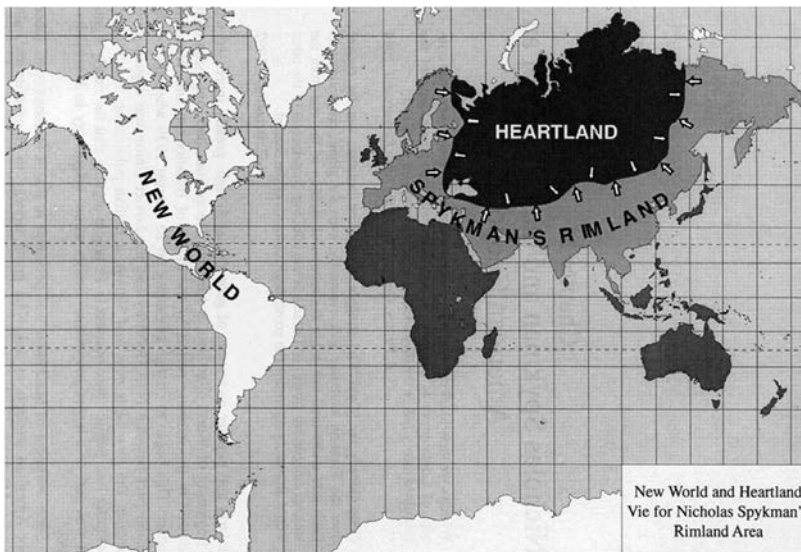
⁶Reported in The Geographical Journal, volume 170, issue 4, December 2004, pages 298-321.

⁷These changes can be seen schematically in TAZMAN, Howard, How World War I changed map of the world, RealClear History, 29 November 2018. Available at https://www.realclearhistory.com/articles/2018/11/29/how_world_war_i_changed_map_of_the_world_389.html

⁸MACKINDER, Halford, Democratic ideals and reality. A study in the politics of reconstruction, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1919.

whoever dominated the heartland would dominate the island continent, and whoever dominated the island continent would dominate the world⁹.

Obviously, there was no lack of criticism and different and differential views (in fact, in 1943, and in the midst of the Second World War (1939-1945), Mackinder responded to proposals to update his theory with a new essay, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace"¹⁰, reaffirming it); but, despite the differences, the general scheme, with nuances, apparently continued to have similar views and followers.



Fuente: https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/bd88yq/illustration_of_a_geostrategic_idea_nicholas_john/

Also in the midst of the conflagration, with the Second World War raging, Nicolas Spykman (1893-1943) developed a theory, largely complementary to Mackinder's, which was set out mainly in his posthumous work, "The Geography of the Peace". But the nuance he

introduced was the renewed significance of that "marginal ring", that ring of circumvallation –which he called "Rimland", as can be seen in the accompanying image– surrounding the land mass that constituted the essence of world power in the Mackinderian vision, an area whose control would keep the power that dominated it isolated and unable to expand. Consequently, it was not a question of controlling the heartland, it would be enough to encircle it.

Spykman therefore argued that geopolitical concerns and efforts should be directed at controlling Rimland, as he pointed out¹¹, whoever controls Rimland controls Eurasia, and whoever controls Eurasia controls the fate of the world.

⁹Ibid. page 194.

¹⁰Published in Foreign Affairs, volume 21, issue 4, July 1941, pages 595-605.

¹¹SPYKMAN, Nicholas J., The Geography of the Peace, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944, page 43.

With the end of the Second World War and the beginning of what would be called the Cold War, the permanent tensions between the two great superpowers, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in a world divided into blocs, a large part of the disputes took place in this Rimland, in this zone that would allow the containment or global expansion of the heartland, depending on who dominated it. And from Spykman's theory stems what would become known as the "containment policy"¹², which sought to prevent the expansion of the USSR and which was waged throughout the USSR's circumference –as well as in other parts of the world– using diplomacy, espionage, trade relations, subversion and even direct military interventions.

The perceived need to strengthen this Rimland is what would give rise to the Marshall Plan¹³ (1947), to rebuild part of Europe devastated after World War II in order to prevent it from becoming easy prey for the Soviet adversary, and would also motivate the so-called "Truman Doctrine"¹⁴, enunciated by US President Harry Truman in 1947, whereby the United States indicated that it would help any country to prevent it from falling into the hands of Moscow – or communist countries as a whole, following the proclamation of the People's Republic of China by Mao Tse Tung in 1949. China, a large country physically located in the disputed Rimland, became a new rival, which would end up generating the so-called "domino theory" on the part of the United States, whereby it would be necessary to prevent one country from falling into Communist hands so that the rest, like the pieces of the aforementioned board game, would not fall one after the other. From the Korean War (1950) to the Afghan War (1979) to the long Vietnam War, the Rimland is full of conflict and the use of all sorts of geopolitical tools to gain control of this large swathe of land and coastline.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 –and the departure from Soviet orbit of all the 'satellite' countries of Eastern Europe, a key Rimland space– and with the demise of the USSR in 1991, the twentieth century seems to have largely responded to the geopolitical

¹²A brief summary of what the containment policy entailed can be found in WILDE, Robert, Containment: America's plan for communism, Thought.Co, 29 October 2018. Available at <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-containment-1221496>

¹³THE GEORGE C. MARSHALL FOUNDATION, History of the Marshall Plan. Available at <https://www.marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/history-marshall-plan/>

¹⁴THE AVALON PROJECT, President Harry Truman's address before a joint session of Congress, 12 March 1947, Truman Doctrine. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204183708/http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/trudoc.htm>

postulate of the heartland and its expansion or containment through Rimland disputes. But, coincidentally –or not– this postulate has its roots, at least the recent ones, in the previous century, the 19th century.

The term "Great Game", popularised by Rudyard Kipling following its inclusion in one of his best-known works¹⁵, referred to the struggle sustained by Great Britain, the great maritime power of the 19th century, against the Russian Empire to prevent its access to the sea, especially in Central Asia. However, over time and by extension, it was applied to actions along the entire length of the immense Russian border, using everything from the creation of buffer states (as in the paradigmatic case of Afghanistan) to support for local anti-Russian forces and movements to prevent access to the sea, including the use of rival powers (as was the case with the Ottoman Empire) with the maxim of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"... instrumentalising in this "game" all measures¹⁶ available to the British –and obviously seeking the opposite effect, on the Russian side– to avoid control of the spaces that would give access to that "heartland" to the ocean, so as to allow Moscow to have an open door to the world through which it could project its enormous power and potential.

Nineteenth century, twentieth century... it seems that the same issues –with other actors– are settled with the same stubbornness and tenacity... will it be the same in the twenty-first century?

A question of the present!: Alliance for RIMLAND?

Beyond the disquisitions and arguments, for and against, as to whether the planet is in a new 'Cold War', the truth is that the world is in the midst of a geopolitical reconfiguration; and while the world's leading power, the United States of America, has pivoted its efforts towards Asia-Pacific since 2011, given China's growing power and capacity for influence, it has also simultaneously carried out a relative geopolitical abandonment of many areas of the planet –from Africa to the weakening of the transatlantic link– which has generated a vacuum that is being exploited by its competitors and rivals.

¹⁵The work in question is "Kim", published in 1901, which uses as its setting the struggle between the Russian Empire and the British Empire in Central Asia.

¹⁶HOPKIRK, Peter, *The Great Game: the struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, Kodansha America, New York, 1994

But the scale of the challenge (controlling Rimland) is enormous, so it is not feasible for a single power to do it – it is a complex task even for a superpower. And Russia is a regional power, but it is not the former Soviet Union, although it is actively working to regain its status as a global potential; Turkey is a powerful regional actor, trying to expand its capabilities and influence in this space at the crossroads between Asia, Europe and Africa; and China, the world's second economic power but still with gaps in other fields (which it is closing at full speed) and with aspirations to be the first global power and a desire to be a full superpower, perhaps the superpower of the 21st century.

By history and potential, Russia has been the champion of the struggle for Rimland. But given the impossibility of doing this alone, the reality of the growing power of its old rivals –Russia's relations with Turkey and China have for centuries been far from friendly¹⁷– and the need to provide an outlet for its main source of wealth, the sale of hydrocarbons –both because of the fact that these countries are consumers, especially China, and because of the fact that these countries are transit points for oil and gas pipelines, especially Turkey, in addition to the fact that a powerful network of these "arteries of the planet" runs through this disputed Rimland, through which flows of hydrocarbons could flow outside Russian control, which Moscow does not like– it could be that, finally, despite being "strategic rivals", a "tactical alliance" has been forged that makes possible, at least, the denial of Rimland for the "West". Or at least for the time being, while positions are being taken up in the area.

Russia: the bear is emerging from the taiga again

For the Russian Federation, for Russia, the security of its borders, understood in a very broad sense, has been an obsession throughout history; therefore, its position in relation to its former zone of influence is always constant, and it is of vital importance for Russia's interests to consolidate a security perimeter that does not stop at its own borders¹⁸: And, associated with this fact, add Russia's constant perception of its rivals' recurrent attempts

¹⁷As a simple sample AYDIN, Mustafa, The long view on Turkish-Russian rivalry and cooperation, GMF, 8 June 2020. Available at <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/long-view-turkish-russian-rivalry-and-cooperation>; YAU, Niva, Russia and China's quiet rivalry in Central Asia, Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2020. Available at <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/cap-1-yau.pdf>

¹⁸PIQUÉ, Josep, Interpretar a Rusia para una relación posible, Política Exterior, 5 March 2021. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/interpretar-a-rusia-para-una-relacion-posible/>

to encircle and isolate it, to cut it off from the sea and drive it back into the interior of the steppe¹⁹, away from Rimland, whatever the model used, be it "the great game" or "the containment policy". And, in this century, as Putin himself points out, "Once we managed to stabilise the situation, once we recovered (in the 2000s), the containment policy was immediately set in motion. First, step by step and then more and more. And the stronger we became, the stronger the containment policy became"²⁰.

And to this end, continuing from the Russian perspective, its rivals employ all kinds of geopolitical tools, which, among many other consequences, have led to the so-called "Colour Revolutions"²¹, revolts that from Moscow's point of view are nothing more than subversions sponsored by other nations, nothing more than the use of extremism as a geopolitical tool and the redistribution of spheres of influence²², nothing more than a new attempt to try to separate Russia from the so-called "post-Soviet space".



In addition to the eagerness to recover or at least maintain a high degree of influence in the former republics that together with Russia made up the USSR²³ –in the attached image, Russia in yellow, the rest of the Soviet republics in colours other than grey– there is a pan-Russian vision of the so-called

¹⁹In this sense, SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Marco geopolítico de Rusia: constantes históricas, dinámica y visión en el siglo XXI, in VVAA, Rusia bajo el liderazgo de Putin. La nueva estrategia rusa a la búsqueda de su liderazgo regional y el reforzamiento como actor global, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Strategy Paper, issue 178, Madrid, 2015, pages 15-77. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_178.pdf

²⁰SPUTNIK NEWS, Putin: las "fuerzas contrarias" aprovechan descontento social para impulsar las protestas, 13 February 2021. Available at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20210213/1104021423.html>

²¹Very succinctly RT, Colour Revolutions, 6 March 2015. Available at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/168235-revoluciones-colores-golpe-estado>

²²RT, Putin: we have to learn lessons from colour revolutions in other countries, 20 November 2014. Available at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/147716-putin-rusia-revoluciones-colores-extremismo>

²³In the Baltic: Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia; in Eastern Europe: Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine; in the Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia; in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

“Russian world”²⁴ that includes not only areas where there are minorities or groups of "Russians", but even areas that are sympathetic to Russia.

As the then Russian president pointed out shortly after the war with Georgia in 2008, in relation to Russia's foreign policy lines, Moscow has "Regions of privileged interest", besides of course the border ones, but not only those²⁵. And accusations of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) trying to penetrate its security glacis²⁶, have been gaining momentum since the middle of the last decade in statements from Moscow.

And while Russia continues to actively seek to maintain its sphere of influence, that part of Rimland that it considers essential to its interests and security, it is no less true that the growing presence of China and Turkey is testing Russia's capabilities in Eurasia, for although relations are complex, there are points of common ground with Beijing –and less so with Ankara– because in addition to sharing the vision of a multipolar world (i.e. "not dominated by the West"), Moscow does not see them as a threat to its internal order²⁷. Necessity has led Moscow, at least for the time being, to look to former rivals for support.

And what are the interests of these allies/ rivals?

Turkey: the wolf howls again

Turkey, in the midst of its attempt to recover neo-Ottoman geopolitics, continues to employ different tools to expand its influence and presence in this key area of the planet.

²⁴ZEVELEV, Igor, Russia in the changing post-Soviet space, Russialist.org, 25 November 2020. Available at <https://russialist.org/russia-in-the-changing-post-soviet-space/>

²⁵PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA, Dmitry Medvedev interview with Russian television channels, 31 August 2008. Available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1276>

²⁶PIQUÉ, Josep, Interpretar a Rusia para una relación posible, Política Exterior, 5 March 2021. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/interpretar-a-rusia-para-una-relacion-posible/>

²⁷MANKOFF, Jeffrey, A kinder, gentler bear? Why rumors of Russia's post-soviet retreat are premature, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 17 December 2020. Available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kinder-gentler-bear-why-rumors-russias-post-soviet-retreat-are-premature>



Fuente: <https://commons.princeton.edu/mg/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MG-The-Ottoman-Empire-in-the-Late-Seventeenth-Century.jpg>

Its own position as a land crossing point between the Middle East, Europe and Africa – as can be seen in the attached image of the former Ottoman Empire– together with the presence of ethnically and linguistically related populations, as well as powerful efforts employing the full panoply of geopolitical tools –including on occasion in the face of

accusations of supporting Islamic fundamentalism in its most violent forms²⁸– to gain an advantageous position in the area, make it an actor to consider, at least on a 'regional' scale in this disputed Rimland.

Although Russia and Turkey, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, have fought continuous wars until the 20th century, in Moscow's quest for an outlet to the sea, and in the imagination and in their respective worldviews they occupy opposing positions, in the last decade they have cooperated in the face of the disputes that both nations have with the West. Thus, from the oil and gas pipeline projects through Turkish soil to transport Russian hydrocarbons around Ukraine to the relative collaboration and agreements reached in the Syrian war and in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020) in the Caucasus, the relationship between the two powers is based on pragmatism, but without forgetting that in Libya, during the recent civil war, they were on opposing sides or that Turkey's imperial dreams are viewed with suspicion by Moscow, as they share areas of influence and a desire for control. Therefore, from time to time, it is feasible to find reports on the "grandeur of Turkish imperial dreams"²⁹ in Russian media, highlighting Ankara's

²⁸ALSUMAIDAIE, Mujahed, Turkish influence in Central Asia and Islamist extremism, European Eye on Radicalization, 22 July 2019. Available at <https://eeradicalization.com/turkish-influence-in-central-asia-and-islamist-extremism/>

²⁹SPUTNIKNEWS, Ilusiones imperiales: ¿Podrían los turcos devorar Crimea y el resto del sur de Rusia?, 15 February 2021. Available at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20210215/ilusiones-imperiales-podrian-los-turcos-devorar-crimea-y-el-resto-del-sur-de-rusia-1106771069.html>

appetite for the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, and how it pursues an active or even aggressive policy in these areas.

Turkey sees an opportunity to try to restore the Ottoman zone of influence, from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China³⁰, and despite the rivalry with Russia, pursues a very active foreign policy, involving negotiations and agreements with Moscow, noting that the 21st century will be Turkey's century³¹.

However, Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), due to this neo-Ottomanism and the relationship with Russia, finds itself at odds with several of its neighbouring countries, and even with other NATO members, such as Greece and France, with whom incidents have occurred, especially in the eastern Mediterranean; and indeed, the relationship between Turkey and the United States is at a very low ebb, with Washington even pointing to the loss of a certain level of trust³². It is also pointed out that Turkey's ambitions may be too broad, and that in the potential need to choose between Washington and Moscow³³, the benefits for Ankara would be greater in the first case than with Russia... the dispute is a foregone conclusion.

The maxim of putting one's own interests above all else is therefore fully valid in the struggle for Rimland... but can this balance be maintained against the real power in Rimland, against China?

China: The dragon spreads its wings!

China's unstoppable rise in recent decades has meant that it has moved from being an "emerging power" to being, in the last decade, a "fully emerging" power, a fact that was

MARCOU, Jean and ÇELIKPALA Mitat, *Regard sur les relations turco-russes: de la rivalité dans un monde bipolaire à la coopération dans un monde euroasiatique?*, Institut français d'études anatolines, 2020, paragraph 17. Available at <https://books.openedition.org/ifeagd/3178?lang=es>

³¹TREND NEWS AGENCY, PM: 21st century will be the century of Turkey, 17 November 2013. Available at <https://en.trend.az/world/turkey/2212128.html>

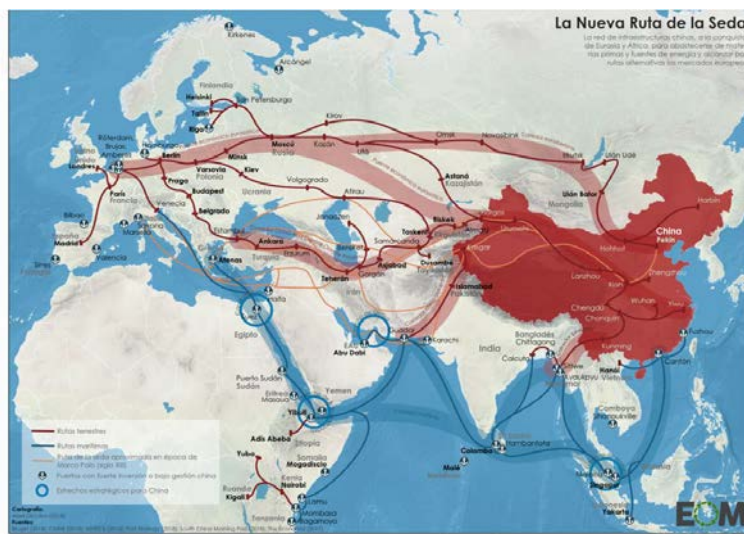
³²VVAA, Biden gives Turkey the silent treatment, *Foreign Policy*, 3 March 2021. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/03/biden-erdogan-turkey-silent-treatment-diplomacy-middle-east-syria-crisis-nato/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=30790&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&?tpcc=30790

³³ÖZEL, Soli, *Whither Turkey's ambitions?*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 28 December 2020. Available at <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/whither-turkeys-ambitions-28798>

most evident when it became the world's second largest economy in 2011, surpassing Japan.

And, in September 2013, during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan (a country located in Central Asia, in the middle of Rimland), this increasingly omnipresent China launched³⁴ the so-called New Silk Road, an initiative that would be complemented a month later with the proposal for a Maritime Silk Road. Gradually, the vision and projects have grown in scope, intensity and range, as well as in terminology, with the acronym OBOR (One Belt One Road) increasingly being used as the main thrust of the vision.

From China's perspective, the new Silk Road should not be seen from a Cold War perspective, nor should it be seen as a new "Marshall Plan". It is an element of cooperation³⁵ which, by increasing the possibilities for mobility and interconnection, will also increase the possibilities for economic growth of all the countries involved in the initiative, creating a sphere of shared prosperity.



Fuente: EL ORDEN MUNDIAL <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas/la-nueva-ruta-de-la-seda-de-china/>

But this new Silk Road –and the attached image shows one of the various approaches to it– envisages, both by land and by sea, circumventing the heartland along the entire length of the Rimland, in addition to China's intention to create another great axis through the north, through Russia itself, along the Trans-Siberian, which has never been to

³⁴XINHUA, Chronology of China's Belt and Road Initiative, 24 June 2016. Disponible en <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0624/c90883-9077342.html>

³⁵MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets the press, 8 March 2015. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1243662.shtml

Moscow's liking, indicating that, although it supports the Initiative, it is not part of it³⁶, and that its own interests will always take precedence.

In addition to China's expansion in Asia, in the Indo-Pacific area³⁷ using, among other elements, this Initiative, it is also doing so in many areas of the former post-Soviet space, whether in Central Asia, the Caucasus or Eastern Europe itself. And Russia sees many of those nations in which it considers it has a "privileged interest" –according to its own terminology– opting, to varying degrees of intensity, for the new Asian partner, resulting in Moscow's loss of leverage across its security glacis; even in Belarus³⁸, the presence of Chinese investment is increasingly significant, which does not fully satisfy Russian intentions and pretensions, as Beijing provides a powerful alternative to Moscow's previous quasi-monopoly.

In fact, in an area of classic Russian influence such as the Balkans, the Chinese presence is gradually displacing Moscow; news such as "China replaces Russia as the main investor in Montenegro"³⁹; "China increases its presence in the Balkan media"⁴⁰, or "China has overtaken Russia as Serbia's major ally"⁴¹ populate the media and the realities on the ground.

On the other hand, and in spite of the Initiative's enabling approach, it includes, in addition to many challenges, the possibility of several risks –among others, those common to any large infrastructure project⁴²: risk of debt and non-payment, governance risks (corruption), risk of uncompleted and unfinished works, as well as environmental risks

³⁶SHAH, Ankur, Russia loosens its belt, 16 July 2020. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/16/russia-china-belt-and-road-initiative/>

³⁷PARRA PÉREZ, Águeda, El juego geopolítico de la nueva Ruta de la Seda en Asia Pacífico, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 126/2018, 10 December 2018. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEEO126_2018AGUPAR-RutaSeda.pdf

³⁸STANDISH, Reid, To keep Putin out, Belarus invites the U.S. and China in, 1 January 2020. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/01/belarus-lures-us-china-to-forestall-putin-russia/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=1899%E2%80%A6

³⁹BALKAN INSIGHT, China replaces Russia as largest investor in Montenegro, 20 October 2020. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/20/china-replaces-russia-as-largest-investor-in-montenegro/>

⁴⁰BALKAN INSIGHT, China increasing its footprint in Balkan media, study concludes, 9 December 2020. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/09/china-increasing-its-footprint-in-balkan-media-study-concludes/>

⁴¹BALKAN INSIGHT, China has overtaken Russia as Serbia's great ally, 6 July 2020. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/china-has-overtaken-russia-as-serbias-great-ally/>

⁴²THE WORLD BANK, Belt and Road Initiative, 29 March 2018. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>

and social risks. In fact, it is pointed out that the Initiative is changing cities and threatening communities⁴³, as massive infrastructure construction projects, business parks, logistics zones, ports and airports, oil pipelines, communication lines, etc. often do not take into account –especially in areas where legislation is more lax– basic aspects for the quality of life and full development of societies.

The risk most analysed thus far is the so-called "debt trap"⁴⁴, the situation created by the potential inability of countries to repay their loans and thus be in the hands of their creditor – in most cases, in relation to the Initiative, and in different forms, China. And because of this interconnectedness and interdependence of economic flows, it is possible that the bankruptcy of one nation could affect those around it, at least on a regional scale, which could generate a new "domino effect" that, as in the past, could place entire regions of Rimland in the hands of one power.

And the Initiative grows in all possible areas and spaces of expansion, using all available geopolitical tools; in a pandemic environment, reference is made to the creation of a healthy Silk Road, or health Silk Road⁴⁵ –related to the diplomacy of facemasks and vaccines for COVID-19–, a digital Silk Road⁴⁶ –in the framework of the struggle for the deployment of global telecommunications networks and dominant digital technologies–... and even a polar Silk Road is intended to be deployed!

⁴³THE CONVERSATION, How China's Belt and Road initiative is changing cities and threatening communities, 2 February 2021. Available at <https://theconversation.com/how-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-is-changing-cities-and-threatening-communities-153515>

⁴⁴DIPLOMATIST, Health Silk Road of China: A new "Debt trap health Diplomacy" in making, 29 June 2020. Available at <https://diplomatist.com/2020/06/29/health-silk-road-of-china-a-new-debt-trap-health-diplomacy-in-making/>

⁴⁵AKON, Saifullah and RAHMAN, Mahfujur, Reshaping the global order in the post-COVID-19 era: a critical analysis, Chinese Journal of International Review, July 2020, DOI: 10.1142/S2630531320500067, page 4. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Saifullah-Akon/publication/343098068_Reshaping_the_Global_Order_in_the_Post_COVID-19_Era_A_Critical_Analysis/links/5f6ad340458515b7cf46ebf2/Reshaping-the-Global-Order-in-the-Post-COVID-19-Era-A-Critical-Analysis.pdf?origin=publication_detail

⁴⁶CYBER SECURITY INTELLIGENCE, China's Digital Silk Road, 5 March 2021. Available at <https://www.cybersecurityintelligence.com/blog/chinas-digital-silk-road-5504.html>

On this last point, it should be noted that China obtained the status of Arctic observer country in 2013⁴⁷, and that its declared policy⁴⁸ for this new space in dispute, which due to climate change is increasing its capacity for navigation and exploitation of the riches existing in it, states that given that the future of the Arctic is of interest to all of humanity, its governance requires the participation of all. And China is willing, within the framework of the⁴⁹ initiative, to participate in all activities in the Arctic, from active resource search to the deployment of ground monitoring stations, pointing to the creation of a blue economic corridor in the Arctic Ocean.

Against this backdrop, it should be borne in mind that, in addition to other potential riches, the North Siberian region is increasingly becoming a supplier of hydrocarbons to China, which is why interest in this region and sector is growing; in fact, within the framework of this cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, bilateral agreements have been signed including the acquisition of shares in the energy transport sector and other transport infrastructures in the Arctic⁵⁰, although for Russia, the Arctic, once a passive zone due to the difficulty of access and mobility, constitutes a new open flank that represents a powerful threat to the heartland and a space in which it is very active.

The Initiative therefore reaches into spaces, environments, materialises in actions, generates perceptions and influence... it is a geopolitical tool of the first order, covering the entire Rimland –both by land and by sea–, venturing into the Arctic zone and even aiming to do so directly through the heartland. Geopolitics at its purest.

In the face of this reality, it is pointed out⁵¹ that China is very active and in a way that greatly involves the security of the Alliance (NATO) itself, since its control of a large part

⁴⁷LANTEIGNE, Marc, The twists and turns of the polar silk road, Over the Circle, 15 March 2020. Available at <https://overthecircle.com/2020/03/15/the-twists-and-turns-of-the-polar-silk-road/>

⁴⁸THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, White paper, China's Arctic Policy, 26 January 2018. Available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm

⁴⁹XINHUANET, Full text: Vision for maritime cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, 20 June 2017. Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm

⁵⁰STAALESEN, Atle, Chinese money for Northern Sea Route, The Barents Observer, 12 June 2018. Available at <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2018/06/chinese-money-northern-sea-route>

⁵¹DE MAIZIÈRE, Thomas and WESS MITCHELL, A., NATO needs to deal with China head-on, Foreign Policy, 23 February 2021. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/23/nato-china-brussels-summit-biden-europe-alliance/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=30550&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&?tpcc=30550

of the infrastructure of this Initiative –from telecommunications networks to transport and port infrastructure– directly affects the preparedness, interoperability and security of the countries' communications; and that given China's political system, the distinction between the military and civilian sectors, at certain levels, is very blurred, so that obtaining technology and knowledge from the civilian sector, from Chinese companies deployed in member countries of the Alliance, for subsequent application for military purposes is not out of the question; Moreover, Beijing plans and executes powerful information campaigns to influence the populations and opinion-makers of NATO nations to divide the Alliance. In today's grey-zone hybrid-conflict environment, this reality is dangerous, even if it may be difficult to perceive.

And NATO itself points out that the 2010 strategic concept was designed for an era before great power competition; but that era is now upon us, and therefore appropriate measures need to be taken⁵², as grey environments and hybrid conflicts require new approaches to deterrence and defence.

Faced with such a display of capabilities, given the approaches and positions of the powers vying for control of Rimland, and from the perspective of a bloc of nations that aspires to have global representativeness and weight –in addition to a direct and vital interest in the dispute– the question would be: what is the role of the Rimland powers?

⁵²In this sense NATO, NATO 2030: united for a new era. Analysis and recommendations of the reflection group appointed by the NATO Secretary General, 25 November 2020. Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf

What about Europe?

Europe, and most especially Eastern Europe, is a space heavily conditioned by this



Fuente: VVAA., Empty Shell no more: China's growing footprint in Central and Eastern Europe, Association for International Affairs, Policy Paper, abril 2020, página 15.

question, not only because it is a physical part of Rimland, but, if one recalls Mackinder, because it is the control of Eastern Europe that ultimately provides control and access to the heartland, this part of Europe becomes –as at other times in history– the epicentre of a global battle. And to illustrate this reality, the image attached to this text is not from Mackinder and from a century ago, it is contemporary and reflects the so-called 17+1 Platform, which includes the countries of Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States⁵³, 17 European countries and China, united in a framework of economic and commercial cooperation, infrastructure development...

Apparently, the continent's attitude in this global struggle is more passive than active. Europe's own contradictions and weaknesses⁵⁴ mean, in an era of global change, not only that it is not able to occupy an adequate position in the new order that is emerging, but that its soil is also a contested part of this planetary reconfiguration. And at a time of great interests and great forces at play, the non-union, if not disunion, of European countries poses a serious problem and makes it impossible to confront powerful foreign interests opposed to our own, without forgetting that the defence of the values of democracy and freedom in the broad sense, of which Europe is a world reference, cannot be achieved without an adequate position in this order.

Even EU countries, especially those in the East and the so-called Visegrad Group⁵⁵, have no problem turning a deaf ear to the EU and addressing issues from a seemingly purely national interest perspective, sometimes in the face of guidelines and rules from Brussels.

⁵³VVAA, Empty Shell no more: China's growing footprint in Central and Eastern Europe, Association for International Affairs, Policy Paper, April 2020. Available at https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf

⁵⁴SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, Europa... Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 05/2021, 3 February 2021. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA05_2021_PEDSAN_SemblanzaBalcanica.pdf

⁵⁵Eslovaquia, Hungría, Polonia y República Checa. Sobre su posición frente a Bruselas BBC NEWS, Qué es el Grupo de Visegrado, los "chicos malos" que desafían a Francia y Alemania en la Unión Europea, 2 February 2018. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-42879957>

In this complex, hybrid, grey environment where influence plays a key role, it is enough to point out that, at a time as complex as the one we are living through, in the same way that in the first wave of the pandemic the term "facemask diplomacy" was coined, alluding to the political gains sought through the delivery of these elements of protection to certain nations, the expression "vaccine geopolitics" is already occupying the international acquis. Like any element that can generate support, the pandemic virus vaccine has become a new geopolitical instrument⁵⁶, a way of strengthening ties, shifting loyalties and channelling sentiments towards one nation or another, a means of gaining influence.

The fact that the Russian vaccine Sputnik V is a state vaccine means that the government can clearly and directly decide to whom it is sold, to whom it is not sold and at what price, so it directly becomes an instrument of geopolitics, which can be used according to the strategic needs of the Kremlin⁵⁷; and, in this regard, the President of the European Commission questioned the millions of doses offered by Russia to other countries while Moscow is moving very slowly in vaccinating its own citizens, to which Russia points out that what is intended is to "politicise a problem in an unfounded manner (...)"⁵⁸.

In this struggle and in a pandemic environment, the geopolitics of vaccines is at its peak. So much so that even European Union countries have requested (and in some cases already received) the Russian vaccine, arguing, in the words of the Slovak Prime Minister, that the pandemic overlooks geopolitics⁵⁹... although this decision has generated a crisis in the government of the latter nation, given that the Russian vaccine (at least so far) has not been approved by the European Medicines Agency and where it is indicated by dissenting voices regarding the decision to accept Sputnik-V that it is not only a vaccine,

⁵⁶MOON, Suerie and ALONSO RUIZ, Adrián, La geopolítica de las vacunas contra el COVID-19, Política Exterior issue 199, 1 January 2021. Available at <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/la-geopolitica-de-las-vacunas-contra-el-covid-19/>

⁵⁷BBC NEWS, Sputnik V vaccine: how it went from a source of mistrust to an instrument of Russian influence in the world, 15 February 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-56012192>

⁵⁸EUROPA PRESS, Rusia se muestra "perpleja" con las palabras de Von der Leyen sobre las vacunas y denuncia "politización", 19 February 2021. Available at <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-rusia-muestra-perpleja-palabras-von-der-leyen-vacunas-denuncia-politizacion-20210219144956.html>

⁵⁹BBC NEWS, Sputnik V: por qué muchos en Rusia tiene dudas sobre su propia vacuna, 4 March 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-56266603>

but an instrument of hybrid warfare⁶⁰. And that countries such as Poland, Hungary or Slovakia are considering –or are realising– the possibility of getting vaccines from China or even Russia⁶¹ –a Russia to which these nations are constantly crying out for help and support– is surprising to say the least.

In the face of the clear and firm positions of the Rimland powers, are the ambiguities and paradoxes of others of any use?

Conclusion: Is there only room for one?

Apparently, great realities always return; technical means change, possibilities and areas of dispute change, but, in many cases, the essences remain. And geopolitics, like strategy, is long term, requiring far-sightedness, even if the planned objectives can be achieved in small, almost unnoticed steps.

It seems that, once again, there is a struggle for Rimland, waged by old and new actors. And they "play" a dangerous game and apparently intend, in this circumvallation of the heartland, to maintain a balance that seems inevitable to disappear at some point, depending on the progress of the influence and capacity for action of one or other of the main actors in the contest.

While things can change, and secular and structural rivals can become allies, it is perhaps worth reflecting on whether what is happening in Rimland is nothing more than a "tactical" alliance, limited in time and space, in which each seeks to gain an advantageous position not only for its own interests, but also vis-à-vis its current allies with an eye to a potential confrontation at a later date.

This calculation of "risk-taking" by these powers can be very complex, especially when one of the actors is a power seeking world primacy, another has been a global power and

⁶⁰EURO NEWS, Slovakia's ruling coalition in crisis over Sputnik-V COVID-19 vaccine, 4 March 2021. Available at <https://www.euronews.com/2021/03/04/slovakia-s-ruling-coalition-in-crisis-over-sputnik-v-covid-19-vaccine>

⁶¹EL DIARIO, Unos se acercan a Israel y otros miran a Rusia y China: varios países de la UE se desmarcan de Bruselas para buscar más vacunas, 2 March 2021. Available at https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/acercan-israel-miran-rusia-china-paises-ue-desmarcan-bruselas-buscar-atajos-vacunas_1_7265469.html

seeks to regain that status, and a third aspires to climb several rungs on the ladder of world power... the capabilities of all are very different and even the worldviews themselves are not only different, but to a large extent, opposing.

And if "there is only room for one", what happens to Europe, who "lives" in Rimland?

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