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Reading Spykman in Beijing

Can the Rimland theory question the Belt and Road Initiative?

Lire Spykman à Pékin. La théorie de Rimland peut-elle remettre en question l'initiative des Nouvelles routes de la soie ?

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Résumés

Français English

Cet article teste la pertinence de la théorie du Rimland de Nicholas J. Spykman pour expliquer la logique de l'initiative chinoise de la Ceinture et de la Route (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI). Ce test apparaît comme particulièrement approprié puisque la BRI s'étend sur le tracé géographique du Rimland. Une critique de la théorie du Rimland soulignant l'importance de mélanger des éléments réalistes et culturels est proposée pour expliquer dans quelle mesure ce cadre datant des années 1930 et 1940 peut élucider la posture stratégique de l'initiative chinoise. L'article utilise le cadre théorique de Spykman pour illustrer l'attitude de la Chine dans la région ainsi que ses ambitions potentielles de domination. Il élucide également les tendances déclenchées par la force centrifuge et centripète exercée par la Chine en tant que puissance émergente, en supposant l'impossibilité par les autres puissances régionales d'ignorer ces changements, ainsi que les nouvelles formes d'endiguement et d'alignement en train de se matérialiser dans la zone.

D'un point de vue méthodologique, l'article s'appuie sur la littérature existante sur la BRI, en prenant en considération les auteurs chinois et non chinois afin d'identifier les forces et les faiblesses des deux approches. L'analyse montre jusqu'à quel point le paradigme Spykmanien permet de comprendre la logique et la dynamique de la BRI, ainsi que les limites liées à l'utilisation de la géopolitique classique pour comprendre la Chine.

This article tests Nicholas J. Spykman's rimland theory relevance to better frame the logic of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This test seems particularly appropriate since the BRI runs along the rimland geographical layout. A critique of the rimland theory emphasizing the importance of mixing realist and cultural elements is offered to question to what extent a framework that was coined between 1930s and 1940s to elucidate political dynamics affecting the most populated and resource rich areas on Earth remains relevant to interpret BRI's logic and strategic posture. The rimland theory is employed to answer general questions regarding the Chinese project, and especially its attitude in the area and its potential ambitions to dominate it. The article also retraces trends aroused by the centrifugal and centripetal force released by China as an emerging power, assuming that other powers cannot remain indifferent to China-led changes, and that these evolutions inevitably trigger new forms of containment and alignment. Its final goal is to identify, if any, merits and limits of Spykman's best-known scholarly work to be associated to the BRI.

From a methodological perspective, the article offers a review of the existing literature on the BRI, taking into consideration both Chinese and non-Chinese authors so as to identify strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches. The hermeneutic contribution of the Spykmanian paradigm is then associated to BRI logics and dynamics. Limitations linked to the use of classical geopolitics to interpret China are also emphasized.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : géopolitique, Chine, Rimland, nouvelles routes de la soie, infrastructures, Spykman (Nicholas J.)

Keywords: geopolitics, China, Rimland, Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructures, Spykman (Nicholas J.)

Notes de l'auteur

Both scholars contributed to the article. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, and 5 have been edited by Claudia Astarita, paragraphs 1, 6, 7, and 8 by Matteo Marconi.

Texte intégral

1. Background

- Nicholas J. Spykman's rimland theory was coined between 1930s and 1940s to explain political dynamics affecting the most populated and resource rich areas on Earth. The rimland is the strip of coastal land that encircles the Eurasian landmass. It connects the four great Eurasian peninsulas, namely Europe, the Middle East, India, and China (Spykman, 1944, p.37). Despite being largely misinterpreted due to an oversimplification of the scholar's thinking, the rimland theory has since become Spykman's best-known scholarly work (Cohen, 2003, p.22; Polelle, 1999, p.118)¹.
- Although anchored to the specific situation of the Second World War, Spykman's theory aims at grasping long-term dynamics and constants from both a geographical and political dimension. It cannot be reduced to a simple anti-Soviet interpretation (Dodds, 2007, p.36; O'Sullivan, 1986, p.32), or to the foundation of the Cold War bipolar view (Farish, 2010, p.25; Polelle, 1999, p.10). A deterministic reading of Spykman's thinking oversimplifies its complexity leading to inevitable misinterpretations (Stefanachi, 2013). As Zajec (2016) pointed out, it is not possible to restore Spykman's stature without referring to Georg Simmel, the author the Dutch American scholar dedicated his doctoral thesis to (Spykman [1925], 2004).
- Spykman's contribution to explaining regional conflict dynamics has been recently revived by several scholars (Antrim, 2010; Pautasso, 2014; Van Herpen, 2014). This paper proposes to test the relevance of the rimland theory to a specific case, the one of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the strategic successor to the Zhongnanhai's 'Go Out' policy launched in 1999. This test seems particularly appropriate since the BRI runs along rimland geographical layout. Is it a mere coincidence? Or can this overlay tell us something about the nature of the BRI?



This article offers a critique of the rimland theory emphasizing the importance of mixing material and cultural elements to interpret the contemporary reality. Its final goal is to identify, if any, merits and limits of this theoretical framework when associated to the BRI.

- 4 The rimland theory can help us answer general questions, such as whether there are privileged areas in the world where great power poles might emerge. It can also help to study the trends aroused by the centrifugal and centripetal force released by China as an emerging power, assuming that other actors cannot remain indifferent to China-led changes, and that these evolutions inevitably trigger new forms of containment and alignment. Finally, the article discusses China's attitude in the rimland area and its potential ambitions to dominate it.

From a methodological perspective, the article offers a review of the existing literature on the BRI, taking into consideration both Chinese and non-Chinese authors so as to identify strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches. The hermeneutic contribution of the Spykmanian paradigm can help to discuss BRI logics and dynamics. Limitations linked to the use of classical geopolitics to interpret China are also emphasized.

2. The rimland: influences and opportunities to achieve global power

- 5 To question what the rimland theory can rationalize about the BRI it is necessary to untangle the functioning of the rimland theory as well as the connections between the Chinese project and the general framework of Spykman's vision.

According to Spykman, international relations are controlled by state actors who, while acknowledging themselves as equals, have no other higher authority. The international system is anarchic and characterized by a permanent latent conflict (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.16-17). This insecurity makes survival emerge as state's main priority (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.19). Survival is understood as the 'preservation of territorial integrity and political independence' (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.17)².

- 6 The ability to exert power is at the core of countries' survival. States' power depends on 'classical' geographical factors: 1) the influences and the opportunities offered by the material space (the land and the climate); 2) the availability of natural resources (Spykman, 1944, p.4); 3) the relative position of a country regarding other powers (Zajec, 2016, p.304-309; Spykman, 1938b).

- 7 Countries' choices are not only influenced by their absolute position on Earth, but also by their relative position, whether they share their borders with strong or weak nations (Spykman, 1938b). The relative power of neighbouring countries influences the orientation of a country's politics towards the land or towards the sea (Spykman, 1938b, p.223). This epistemological choice makes Spykman's approach distinctly regionalist, therefore able to explain the political game as the result of a series of local interactions (Zajec, 2016, p.308).

- 8 Assessing countries' geopolitical role requires addressing geographical, political, economic (Spykman, 1944, p.22), and psychological factors (Stefanachi, 2013). Domestic social aspects are understood as subsidiary, therefore contingent on the fulfilment of survival needs (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.18). Spykman considers values (created by culture) as tools in a world ruled by strength: given that all actors are bearers of values, relations between states are regulated by no other value than power (Spykman, 1944, p.4).

- 9 Despite the unstable balance of power (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.465), geography remains crucial to identify regularities in international relations (Zajec, 2016, p.508). The most relevant connections between power and geographical factors can be identified in a specific area, the rimland: the coastal section of the Eurasian landmass connecting the four great peninsulas of Eurasia, namely Europe, the Middle East, India, and China (Spykman, 1944, p.37). This is where most of the world's population and wealth are located³.

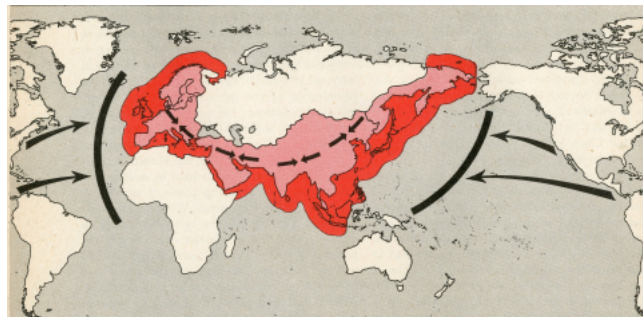
- 10 From a geographical perspective, power is said to abound in the northern hemisphere thanks to a greater concentration of territories with a temperate or subtropical climate, which are more suitable for agricultural development (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.42). Power can be generated by an increase of population if the latter is supported by greater agricultural and industrial development, depending on the availability of raw materials and technological progress (Spykman, 1944, p.29).

From a strategic perspective, the rimland is considered an amphibious area well protected from both maritime and continental powers (Spykman, 1944, p.41). According to Spykman, the quintessential maritime power is the United States, while Russia/the Soviet Union represents the best example of continental power.

- 11 To control the rimland, islands and territories located just outside Eurasia have an added strategic value. These are the offshore islands and continents of Great Britain, Africa, Japan, and Australia: 'The surrounding string of marginal and Mediterranean seas which separates the continent from the oceans constitutes a circumferential maritime highway which links the whole area together in terms of sea power' (Spykman, 1944, p.38; quote the map 1944, p.38).

Rimland homogeneous characteristics do not imply political unity (Spykman, 1944, p.45). Rimland powers do not have natural rivals, nor a unique strategic character (Zajec, 2016, p.418-425). However, history has proved that they can create alliances with other maritime or continental powers to confront other rimland powers (Spykman, 1944, p.43 and 51).

Figure 1



N. Spykman, Maritime versus amphibian conflict (1944, p. 54).

- 12 The rimland is conceived with two strategic focal points located in the European peninsula and in the Chinese landmass⁴. If two powers were to become hegemon in either of these areas, they could destabilize the global balance of power. In such a scenario, both continental and maritime powers would be excluded by the world's major markets, with heavy repercussions in terms of relative power.

3. Western visions of the Belt and Road Initiative

- 13 Spykman's theory contributes to highlighting the limits of many BRI readings.

Despite its central place in China's foreign policy, the BRI is a conceptually vague project. Foreign observers have sought to establish various interpretations of its origins and objectives. Non-Chinese literature abounds. BRI interpretations are associated to

China's interest in 'strengthening diplomatic relationship and popularity in partner countries', and 'countering economic aspects of US strategic "Pivot to Asia" policy' (Cheng, 2016, p.310).

BRI goals have often been explained recurring to the use of analogies. BRI and AIIB have been introduced as the contemporary version of the 1948 Marshall Plan (Chen, 2014; Shen, 2016)⁵. References to historical cases tend to mention Eurasia as a 'pivot area'. Increasing exchanges with Central Asia are seen as a strategy to replace the former Soviet power in the region (Karrar, 2016), or as a geopolitical effort to extend China's influence in Eurasia's heartland (Clover and Hornby, 2015).

Other sources describe the BRI as a geopolitical response to counter the Obama administration 'Pivot to Asia' (Cai, 2017). For Robert S. Ross, this approach has created the condition for supporting a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the US policy 'unnecessarily compounds Beijing's insecurities and will only feed China's aggressiveness, undermine regional stability, and decrease the possibility of cooperation between Beijing and Washington' (Ross, 2012, p.72).

Shaping international norms and values to its advantage has also been seen as an essential Chinese intention through the BRI (Economy, 2018), and the latter has also been described as 'a geopolitical and diplomatic offensive' (Bondaz et al., 2015), with Xi Jinping's 'community of destiny' seen as an alternative order for the whole region.

Although Chinese scholars tend to refuse to identify the BRI as a geostrategic project, they recognize the Chinese project as a calculated combination of geopolitical factors, economic intelligence and strategic reasoning: 'The Belt and Road is a new formula of global governance which bears some elements of regional economic integration on the one hand and resembles to some extent a partnership arrangement between States on the other hand' (Lingliang, 2016, p.540). The BRI is often described as a geopolitical strategy grounded on an economic logic: 'China is moving away from "hard power" and "strategic military" instruments to favour the use of strategic economic tools' (Shi, 2015). The BRI, along with the AIIB, is meant to cement China's place at the centre of the Asian infrastructural architecture, offering Beijing a chance 'to utilize and develop its growing economic power to influence the behaviour of the states and institutions' in the region (Beeson and Li, 2016, p.495).

This global governance with Chinese characteristics is seen by some as a form of hegemonism. Portrays of the BRI as a hegemonic campaign, with varying degrees of aggressiveness, tend to be frequent in the American literature (Voon and Xu, 2020, p.130).

While Western scholars accurately underscore China's intentions to become the predominant power in the Asia-Pacific region, President Xi's flagship project equally seeks to fulfil Beijing's maritime and continental interests over other major power poles of the Eurasian landmass. As the BRI explicitly recognizes the European peninsula as its 'final destination', to the exclusion of India and with the active participation of the Middle East, Beijing has pushed for greater expansion across the Arabian Peninsula, developing economic and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Sharma, 2019, p.5).

China's economic and political profile is also prominent across the European peninsula, with Central and Eastern Europe identified as entry points into the rest of Europe for BRI land and sea projects (Brattberg et al., 2021, p.10).

Whether the Chinese project has mainly economic or political purposes, literature tends to focus on specific characteristics of BRI, but it never untangles them within their theoretical framework. This deficiency inhibits abstraction and impairs a more global assessment.

Classical geopolitical theories, such as rimland, can connect economic and political factors with structural data such as long-term goals of political actions goals.

4. China's BRI visions

Both BRI public representation in China and BRI projections in Western literature tend to emphasize the economic rather than the political or power dimensions of the initiative.

President Xi Jinping's famous November 2013 speech explicitly linked⁶ China's Western Han Dynasty (206 BC - AD 24) presence in Central Asian countries to the New Silk Roads. In line with the official narrative, Chinese literature refers to the BRI as the 'revitalized Silk Road', an economic initiative to enhance growth and development (Li, 2007).

According to Chinese literature, the shared benefits of 'development and prosperity' the BRI entails do not hide any geopolitical agenda. In 2015, China's ambassador to Britain asserted that the BRI is often misinterpreted by some as confirming Halford Mackinder's heartland theory (Xiaoming, 2015). That would imply that China is seeking to take control over the 'pivot area' of Central Asia (Eurasia) for geopolitical domination. On the contrary, the Chinese vision is keener to emphasize 'shared benefits', as 'the Chinese mind is never programmed around geopolitical or geoeconomic theory' (Xiaoming, 2015).

In March 2015, the Foreign Minister Wang Yi further confirmed that the BRI is not a 'tool of geopolitics', rather as a 'useful complement' to existing international and regional institutions, as it is 'not directed against any specific country or organisation' (Zhang, 2015).

BRI geopolitical interpretations advanced by Chinese scholars are very limited. Most of them have been framed in 2012, presenting the BRI as an initiative potentially able to counter the economic unbalances created by the US strategic 'Pivot to Asia' policy (Tang, 2015).

The BRI is also seen as an attempt to improve China's regional position. Gao Fei considers it as an innovative initiative aimed at implementing a new 'Major-country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics' (Gao, 2015). This type of diplomacy is known as the 'neighbourhood diplomacy' or 'peripheral diplomacy', a frame describing China as a country willing to unconditionally assist its neighbours in their development, regardless of their relationship with China. This is clearly linked to what President Xi considers China's 'new security concept', a concept emphasizing that regional security must be determined by Asians for Asia (Xi, 2014, p.7).

The BRI appears as the core of an emerging Chinese 'grand strategy' aimed at transforming the region's underlying and long-established geopolitical relations (Zhang, 2014). The term 'dual dependency' (二元困境) used by Dr Jiang Ruiping refers to a dependence on external powers, which, in the 'Chinese Dream', could be replaced by regional self-reliance. Chinese academic discourses routinely utilize a series of metaphors (corridors, bridgeheads, and gateways) to qualify the revolutionary geopolitical nature of President Xi's strategic economic venture (Sidaway and Woon, 2017, p.5). These metaphors seek to qualify imageries of flows, connectivity, linkages, and mobilities, which differ from conventional geopolitical theories that purport to encompass more static visions of pivot areas (Liu, 2014).

5. Rimland's vision of the BRI: a critical analysis

Literature also presents some cases in which Spykman's theories, together with the work of Halford J. Mackinder, have been used to interpret the BRI. This practice has resulted in some papers highlighting the continental aspect of the project, while others emphasizing its maritime dimensions. The former qualifies Chinese objectives as the result of a more land-based mindset, while the latter leans towards an in-between interpretation including maritime aspects.

The first approach implies a rigid interpretation of Spykman, with a static contrast between land and sea, transforming China into a continental power (Harper, 2019; Leong Kok Wey, 2019; Xing and Wan, 2015). The BRI's continental approach is grounded on the idea that Eurasian powers develop their socio-economic assets on land. Such a vision increases the verisimilarity of an anti-American alignment between China and Russia (Harper, 2019; Khan and Javaid, 2018, p.158), confirming Beijing's needs to secure land-based lines of communication (Leong Kok Wey, 2019).

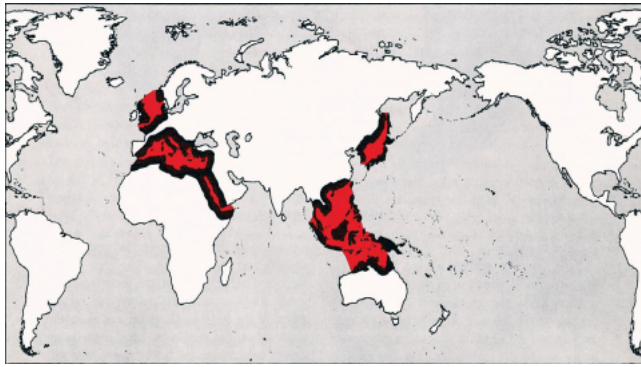
By insisting on the idea of Russia and China creating a unique power pole in the world, Harper and Leong Kok Wey neglect the overall geographical aspect of Mackinder's theory, reducing Mackinder's concept of Eurasia to a mere function of Central Asia natural resources (Harper, 2019, p.115)⁷.

- 26 An unsatisfactory interpretation of classical geopolitics also leads Mark Gilchrist, Ismailov and Papava (2010) to believe that Mackinder's and Spykman's theories are mutually contradictory and unable to untangle the ambivalence of Chinese tension, whether it is directed towards the rimland or the Heartland (Gilchrist, 2019). However, Spykman's approach takes into account Mackinder's previous studies, and offers a reorganization on the Heartland role.
- 27 Elahi, endorsing a Spykmanian intuition, states that the relationship between Eurasian countries works only with strategic partnerships among rimland and Heartland countries (Elahi, 2015). It is not the positioning in one of the two areas that automatically determines alliances and conflicts, rather the political context of reference. In other words, China is deemed to have a potentially hybrid geopolitical character.
- 28 Francis P. Sempa and James Stavridis agree with the advocates of the continental view that Chinese power can only be triggered by an agreement with Russia, which occupies the pivotal area (Stavridis, 2019). The insular nature of the World Island and its resources guarantees the supremacy of the continental power over the maritime one, therefore excluding the maritime powers from the largest land mass (Sempa, 2019).
- 29 Selmier points out that the competition between land and sea routes, as predicted by Mackinder, became a reality in Asia only at the end of the twentieth century. There were substantial delays in the implementation of infrastructures throughout the twentieth century and only now China is actively working to fill this gap. China's point of view, as well as that of classical geopolitics, differentiates between land and sea, but with no clear oppositions, underlining its ambivalence (Selmier, 2019, p.13). Accordingly, it is no coincidence then that the BRI integrates both land and sea accesses.
- 30 Whether we embrace the continental approach or the hybrid one, it follows that China wants to create infrastructure connections with the leading export market (Europe), as well as guarantee the exploitation and import of raw materials which are necessary for the nation's industrial operations (Middle East). From the very beginning, the BRI was designed to recreate a direct relation between China and Europe, a connection that had been kept in place for centuries thanks to the Silk Road launched by the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD).
- 31 Initially presented as the 'New Silk Road', the BRI official narrative has always justified through the goal of spreading progress, wealth, and stability throughout the region, simultaneously boosting the development of land-based infrastructure and efficient sea lanes. This need emerges as a key element justifying an implicit correspondence between the BRI and the amphibious idea of the rimland.
- 32 If Beijing had decided to focus exclusively on the land route, the continental hypothesis would have had to be re-evaluated. On the contrary, the commitment to reduce the large gap existing in 2013 between land and sea routes availability further emphasizes an interesting overlap between the BRI and the amphibious interpretation of the rimland (in contrast with Narins and Agnew, 2020).

6. Chinese position within the rimland: global dimensions and global policy

- 33 This paper argues that BRI literature limitations could be addressed by analysing the Chinese initiative with accurate Spykmanian lenses. After retracing the path that transformed China into a power with global interests, this paragraph refers to its global projection to identify potential connections between the BRI and the rimland. Spykman identifies three variables influencing the life of states: (1) their position, (2) the availability of space and natural resources, and (3) the ability to express power to succeed in international competition. The third variable is presented as deeply conditioned by technological development.
- 34 China is well situated within the rimland and rich in natural resources (2). During the modern era, despite its long coastal front, China's priority has remained the one of protecting the country from internal, continental threats (1). Its limited technological endowment and the lack of trade flows that justified more advanced means of transport (3) are considered other factors inhibiting its maritime potentiality (Spykman, 1938b, p.222).
- 35 The overcoming of China's maritime anomaly has subsequently emerged as one of the core goals of the BRI. Internal (technological development) and peripheral (trade expansion in Southeast Asia) elements, together with the consolidation of a new international equilibrium in which the weight of continental threats was significantly reduced, progressively created the condition for China to reorient its traditional geopolitical position in the XXI century.
- 36 Spykman has always been persuaded that China could play a decisive role in influencing the international balance of power by expanding its maritime capacity and projection: 'China will be a continental power of huge dimensions in control of a large section of the littoral of that middle sea. Her geographic position will be similar to that of the United States in regard to the American Mediterranean. When China becomes strong, her present economic penetration in that region will undoubtedly take on political overtones' (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.469). Spykman also invited the United States to preserve the existing balance of power in East Asia as early as the 1940s: 'The preservation of a balance will then be necessary not only because of our interest in strategic raw materials but also because of what unbalanced power in this region could do to the rest of the world' (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.469).
- 37 The long-term constants conditioning politics lead states to behave in a predictable and repetitive way to secure their own survival. This attitude transforms countries into military organisation pursuing strategic goals from a geographical standpoint (Spykman and Rollins, 1939a, p.391-395). Countries can choose to expand around the circumference of a marginal sea (such as the South China Sea) or rather on its coastline (Spykman and Rollins, 1939b, p.602). Such an expansion involves both the sea and the land, in a symmetrical process explained by the need for mutual protection of both sea routes and the mainland (Spykman and Rollins, 1939b, p.603). An expansion along the coastline, involving both land and sea lanes and targeting marginal seas, correspond to BRI goals.
- 38 A high concentration of economic, political, and strategic interests transforms the Mediterranean and the South China Sea into crucial areas to control (Spykman, 1944, p.45). In China's vision, the defence of the Eurasian coast must be assured by the establishment of modern and efficient naval/military bases along the Maritime Silk Road, and the strengthening of China's defence capacity is essential to safeguard both territories and sea routes under the BRI.

Figure 2



N. Spykman, *Marginal seas* (1944, 55).

39 This similarity between the BRI and the rimland theory is not sufficient to justify the existence of an overlapping between the two constructs.

To question to what extent the rimland theory can be connected to the BRI it is essential to find solid evidence to answer two more questions. First, if survival is the main goal of political actions, why did China decide to guarantee its survival with such an ambitious project? Second, if Spykman's approach is regional, how can we justify that the Chinese plan applies to the entire rimland?

40 Assessing power from a global perspective, embedding the entire Eurasian landmass and not just part of it, emerges as a first solid answer to both questions.

Only a clear global dimension of the interests at stake and the consequential relative size of the economic system of the emerging country can justify the development of a new interest towards the enactment of a global policy. At the same time, it is a matter of fact that, for a global power, the notion of survival is also global. Following Spykman's logic, the control of marginal seas can trigger a dynamic of power accumulation in a rimland power pushing the latter to raise the sphere of its interest to a global level. Since the rimland guarantees the dominance over a significant concentration of wealth and population, monitoring one of its sections is necessary to secure national power for a rimland's power and, at the same time, sufficient to destabilize the existing balance of power. A direct connection among marginal seas could create the conditions for specific countries to use the rimland to secure global rather than merely regional power. By dominating the South China Sea, China can improve its power over the entire marginal seas of the rimland.

41 China's Eurasian policy is consistent with Spykman's theoretical paradigm, albeit not explicitly presented as such. It is the global dimensions of Chinese interests, determined by the breadth of its society and its domestic economy, creating the condition for the development of a global policy, eventually linking its own survival to the control of global dynamics and equilibrium. Other maritime (United Kingdom) and continental (the Soviet Union) global powers have previously succeeded in controlling the rimland or at least in adopting an assertive policy on it. Accordingly, it is not surprising to see a rimland's power such as China adopting an assertive policy on the full rimland and the marginal ring.

42 It is crucial to remember that, at Spykman time, the combination of power necessary to secure a form of control of the rimland by a rimland's power was a condition barely impossible to secure for any existing power. Spykman himself used to express serious concern imagining the consolidation of a 'United Europe' or of a 'new' China reemerging from its ancient glory. The fragmentation of the rimland (in Europe's case) and China's technological backwardness explained their inability to develop a global policy aimed at embracing the entire rimland⁸.

Ultimately, it is the relative political and economic dimensions that determine the opportunity for a rimland power to develop a global policy. Under these circumstances, the transition from a regional to a global scale of power depends on single countries' capacity to accumulate power.

7. The rimland and the current balance of power

43 The consolidation of a hegemonic plan on the rimland cannot be achieved with a single infrastructure project, however ambitious. Power relations observable in the contemporary world, when analyzed from a Spykmanian perspective, conveying the image of an equilibrium in which centers of power are multiplying and outcomes become unpredictable.

Conflict has specific characteristics in East Asia: the juxtaposition of pressures coming from both rimland and Heartland powers, as well as the power relations within the rimland itself (Spykman, 1944, p.51).

44 Spykman argues that the primary interest of the United States must be to avoid the consolidation of any sort of alternative hegemony over the Eurasian landmass, as this scenario would exclude them from the continent and condemn them to an inevitable encirclement: '...our constant concern in peace time must be to see that no nation or alliance of nations is allowed to emerge as a dominating power in either of the two regions of the Old World from which our security could be threatened' (Spykman, 1944, p.34; concept reiterated on page 61).

45 Spykman also believes in the necessity to use sea power to counterbalance a possible rise of China: 'If the Western Powers are to retain any influence at all in the region, they will have to establish island bases for their power' (Spykman, 1944, p.53). The control of the maritime areas located in the proximity of the coastline will be essential to guarantee this protection. According to Spykman, to permanently control the marginal seas the US would have found it 'advisable to ally themselves with the heartland power of Russia in order to gain continental support against the threat of rimland power' (Spykman, 1944, p.55).

46 Differently from the scenario characterizing the Spykman time, Russia, a Heartland power, is no more an intrinsic enemy of China. On the contrary, their common rejection of the US as hegemonic global maritime force is creating more room for bilateral coordination and cooperation (Wenzhao, 2020).

If Spykman was considering India a natural obstacle for China's rise, the latter has secured over the last few decades strong and reliable influence in South Asia. The increase in the strategic relevance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), led China to test, several years before the official launch of the BRI, the "string of pearls" strategy, a strategic initiative to create a network in the (IOR) encircling India (Brewster, 2014).

47 Another element to consider is that against Spykman's wishes, the federation of European interests in a regional organization is also something that had never been experienced before in Europe.

Two obstacles hinder the creation of a hegemony over the rimland. The first is embodied by NATO presence in Europe, a true Spykmanian masterpiece by the United States. NATO is a regional organization regulating defence cooperation among the United States and Europe dominated by the former. With its presence alone, NATO prevents the creation of an alternative hegemony in Europe and binds the European countries to Washington. The growth of the European Union over the past twenty-five years has not significantly weakened NATO political value since no alternative regional military organization has been created.

48 Second, on the other side of the Eurasian coast, China has progressively strengthened its influence without securing a hegemonic role for itself. Island powers such as Taiwan and Japan continue to contain China's ambition as foreseen by Spykman's theory. Although these countries do not have a territorial continuity with Eurasia, they are strongly influenced by its policies due to their

proximity to the mainland. Going back to the other side of the continent for a moment, it is no coincidence that Great Britain plays the same role within NATO, namely supporting the thalassocracy with an anti-hegemonic purpose.

- 49 With India and the Middle East continuing not to emerge as decisive factors in determining the Eurasian geopolitical balance, China remains limited in its hegemonic role in Southeast Asia by the strong military presence of the US thalassocracy, determined to preserve the independence of its island platforms located near the mainland.
- At the same time, China's determination to improve and strengthen its relationship with both India and the Middle East seems confirming a Spykmanian interest in progressively consolidating its power on two more rimland sections.
- Under the current circumstances, to challenge US global geopolitical status, an (unlikely) reconciliation among China and European countries' interests would be necessary.

8. Conclusion: Limits and opportunities of the rimland theory

- 50 The strength and the weakness of classical geopolitics relies on its capacity to outline broad scenarios considered difficult to either confirm or disprove. Starting from a cartographic overlapping of both rimland and BRI political spaces, this case study has attempted to identify the reasons underpinning an apparent resemblance.
- Spykman's system is grounded on the logic of survival, inducing actors to constantly improve their power to survive in an anarchic international system. This condition seems suggesting why a power with global interests (China) is enticed to build a solid network of infrastructures to connect with its main center of economic interests (Europe) and dominate it from a political, economic, and strategic perspective. This network runs through land and sea lanes along the Eurasian coast.
- 51 Although the rimland theory offer a solid explanation to understand pressures for survival, its contribution to untangle the BRI political logic is more limited.
- Spykman's systems is state-centric, albeit non-exclusively, therefore not suitable to decode the complexity of contemporary politics. The main actors of Spykman's system are modern states. Grounding their existence on safeguarding the survival/power of their own institutions, Spykman underestimates the role of socio-cultural practices in their process of building the representation of other countries and in precisising the positioning of allies and enemies.
- 52 Although Spykman refers to ideological warfare (Spykman 1942, [2007], p. 36-38), the struggle for survival is the primary objective of power. Values are considered as functional tools necessary to achieve survival (Spykman 1942, [2007], p.18). Therefore, even in a war context combining "military, political, economic, and ideological tactics into one great war effort" (Spykman 1942, [2007], p.38) priorities will be established considering survival as final objective⁹.
- 53 The contemporary international system is significantly different from the one characterizing Spykman's time. Cultural elements are today crucial in determining countries political orientations, as underpinned by European Union interactions with either the United States or China. Despite the existence of a mutual economic interest between Europe and China in the development of a stronger bilateral connection along the rimland, mutual political-cultural distrust is an important impediment to the deepening of their relationship. This factor is pushing Europeans to prefer to continue to nurture a subordinate relationship with their American ally then to invest on a more embedding partnership with China. Once the variables that Spykman identifies to describe states behaviours on the international chessboard are reinterpreted according to more contemporary trends and criteria, they inevitably lose part of their peremptoriness¹⁰.
- 54 Ultimately, the rimland theory can describe some essential functions in a complex force field such as the one of politics, without however being able to include other equally essential ones. At the same time, classical geopolitics continues to succeed in highlighting aspects of global power relations that continue to be difficult to untangle.

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Notes

1 Throughout our paper, the term 'rimland' will be written in lowercase letters, unlike 'Heartland', which has a capital letter. The choice mirrors Spykman's and Mackinder's different stylistic options about the terms they respectively coined. A stylistic difference which implies a conceptual one, as clarified in the following pages.

2 Access to raw materials, markets, investment opportunities, the limitation of immigration, the assimilation of minorities, the acquisition of naval bases and the protection of social order against destructive forces are secondary goals but still functional to gain power (Spykman [1942], 2007, p.

19).

3 References to rimland are present in Spykman's works from both 1942 and 1944, and they are all quoted in the bibliography. The substantial difference between these two contributions is that only the first was licensed by Spykman. The second was published posthumously. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that only the 1944 text mentions the word rimland. In 1942 Spykman talks about the concept, without explicitly referring to Rimland (Spykman 1942, [2007], p.179-181). For further details, see Zajec (2016, p.418-431).

4 Although Spykman recognizes the Indian potential (1944, p.45), his analysis is mainly concentrated on Europe and the Far East for two reasons. First, reasons of understandable urgency considering the time in which he was writing (Spykman 1944, p.36). Second, because of the critical importance of maritime routes crossing the neighboring marginal seas, including the related choke points (Spykman 1942, [2007], p.101-103 and p.132-133). Third, because of the exceptional power cluster Europe and the Far East represented at that time (Spykman 1942, [2007], p.43).

At present, from an economic perspective, the situation has evolved. As a consequence, the existence of a commercial line linking the two regions has increased its potential value, and this evolution is also the consequence of India new role in the region. From a strategic perspective, however, the availability of air weapon makes it more difficult for maritime power to penetrate the marginal seas facing the Mediterranean and the South China Sea (Spykman 1944, p.54). Maritime powers are expected to be more subject to air attacks in a confined space, a possibility that is instead more limited in a morphologically compact country like India. This situation increases the relative autonomy of Europe and the Far East and, as a consequence, boosts their centrality in the rimland.

5 This comparison was first used by Xu Shanda, the deputy director of State Administration of Taxation, proposing the implementation of a 'Chinese Marshall Plan' to create domestic demand in less developed countries through large-scale overseas investment and loans headed by the government. The comparison was important when the BRI was launched, but it subsequently lost its significance. The fact that the Marshall Plan imposed political conditions on the countries it covered gradually made the use of this analogy unpopular.

6 'President Xi gives speech to Indonesia's parliament' (November 2013). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/-topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtshshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml (accessed 7 Feb. 2021).



7 In doing so, the geographical essence is removed from Mackinder's theory, both as regards the geometric space and the main environmental characteristics. It is no longer a matter of the Pivot Area but of the struggle for resources, energy in particular.

8 Considering its size, as well as its relevance in Spykman's thinking, a policy that affects the entire rimland already has a global dimension.

9 It is indeed the emergence of total war that contributes to connoting the Spykmanian concept of power in a more organicist sense compared to the realist tradition of international relations following the Second World War. If the entire nation is engaged in the war effort, the struggle for survival cannot be limited only to national institutions but will have to extend to the entire territory and population. This assumption inevitably creates a tension in Spykman's thought, soliciting further investigation.

10 It goes beyond the scope of the article to clarify which concept of culture should overcome the limits of Spykman's reading. Here we have chosen to limit ourselves to stating that the geopolitical debate following the Second World War, from Jean Gottmann to Yves Lacoste, up to critical geopolitics, has constantly engaged the idea of referring to the representation that actors make of the world to understand power relations.

Table des illustrations

	Titre	Figure 1
	Légende	N. Spykman, Maritime versus amphibian conflict (1944, p. 54).
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/docannexe/image/12118/img-1.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 2,1M
	Titre	Figure 2
	Crédits	N. Spykman, Marginal seas (1944, 55).
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/docannexe/image/12118/img-2.jpg
	Fichier	image/jpeg, 1,1M

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