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From Heartland and Rimland, to Hyperland: Introducing a New Geopolitical Theory¹

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Abstract

Despite the fact that many geopolitical theories have been conceived, the conditions of the contemporary geopolitical environment have changed dramatically, leading major actors to behaviours that cannot be easily explained such as the New Space Race, massive (dis)information campaigns/operations, and cyber operations. The purpose of this article is to introduce a new geopolitical theory that facilitates the interpretation of this behaviour in the context of the emerging dynamics of the geopolitical arena and identify the new strategic domains that contribute to the enhancement of a state's national power.

Keywords: Heartland, Rimland, Geopolitics, Mackinder, Spykman, World-Island, Strategic Competition, Space, Cyberspace, Information Space.

Introduction

Geopolitics is an International Relations (IR) term that is used to describe the interconnection of geography and politics, dealing inter alia with the distribution of power around the globe, the way geography affects this distribution, etc. (Mirza & Ayub, 2022:187). In the course of time, several geopolitical theories have been conceived in an attempt to explain the behaviour of major international actors, the most known of which are the theories of *Heartland* and *Rimland*. The geopolitical environment though has changed dramatically through time, leading actors to behave in a way that the aforementioned theories cannot explain.

The purpose of this article is to introduce *Hyperland*, a new geopolitical theory that facilitates the interpretation of the behaviour of major international actors in the context of the emerging dynamics of the geopolitical arena and identify new strategic domains that contribute to the enhancement of a state's national power. Its importance lies in the fact that –as a novel theory– takes into consideration the contemporary conditions of the geopolitical environment, thus complements the existing literature in regard to geopolitics providing scholars with an additional analytical tool through which they can support their research.

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The Theories of Heartland and Rimland

Both Heartland and Rimland are theories based on the geopolitical region of the *World-Island* which consists of the African, European and Asian continents. The theory of *Heartland* was first introduced in 1904 and finalized in 1919 by the British geographer *Halford Mackinder* (Mirza & Ayub, 2022:191-193), who argued that in order for a major geopolitical actor to achieve strategic dominance it must gain control of the Heartland, the geographic area around the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Central and North Asia (Figure 1). Mackinder emphasized on the vital importance of *land power* and Heartland's inaccessibility to naval forces, also highlighting the important role of Eastern Europe referring that:

“Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World” (Mackinder, 1942:106).

Figure 1. Graphic design of the theories of Heartland & Rimland



Source: Reddit (2023)

A few decades later in 1942 the American professor *Nicholas Spykman* introduced the theory of *Rimland* (Mirza & Ayub, 2022:193-195), the South coastal part of Heartland (Figure 1), which emphasized on *maritime power*, arguing that a major geopolitical actor could achieve strategic dominance by containing the influence of Heartland's actors referring that:

“Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Spykman, 1944:43).

The Contemporary Geopolitical Environment

One of the biggest differences between the contemporary geopolitical environment and the geopolitical environment of the first half of the 20th century –when Mackinder and Spykman formed their theories– is the technological advancement that prevails nowadays, a situation that affects almost every policy field. Indeed, while the means used at the time of Mackinder and Spykman were the result of the 2nd *Industrial Revolution* (Table 1), the 3rd *Industrial Revolution* that followed led to globalized digital and automated world. Moreover, the 4th *Industrial Revolution* has further changed the way actors behave, as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the large number of emerging technologies provide them with new means that can be used in space, cyberspace and information space (Britannica, 2024).

The main *threats* of the contemporary security environment that have been identified by the European Union (EU), NATO, the United States, Germany and Japan in their strategic documents are *China* and *Russia*, while the main *risks* identified include terrorism, cyberattacks, the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), armed conflicts, climate change, financial imbalance, pandemics, and the degradation of critical infrastructure and supply chains (Koukakis, 2023:62). Moreover, Zanidis (2023) informs us that space is the new domain of strategic rivalry between the United States and China entitled the New Space race (NSR), which is basically a competition for *technological superiority* that affects the entire world.

It must also be stressed that the collapse of the former USSR which ended the Cold War led to China's rise, transforming –according to the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States (Koukakis, 2022:127)– the strategic competition into a competition between Democracies and Autocracies, defining “*out-competing China*” as one of the United States' main priorities. The 2022 NSS also identifies China as the only competitor of the United States with both the intent and power to reshape the international order, referring that:

“The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy. It is their behavior that poses a challenge to international peace and stability—especially waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order” (The White House, 2022:8).

Table 1. The characteristics of the four Industrial Revolutions

NAME OF REVOLUTION	TIME PERIOD	CHARACTERISTICS
1 st Industrial Revolution or Industrial Revolution 1.0 (1IR)	1760 – 1830	Use of new materials Steam power Transport & Communications development
2 nd Industrial Revolution or Industrial Revolution 2.0 (2IR)	1830 - 1950	Electricity invention Internal combustion engines Mass production
3 rd Industrial Revolution or Industrial Revolution 3.0 (3IR)	1950 - 2010	Digital technology Automation Worldwide access to Information
4 th Industrial Revolution or Industrial Revolution 4.0 (4IR)	2010 - Today	Artificial Intelligence Emerging technologies

Note: The referred years do not depict the precise beginning/end of each time period, as they have been selected to facilitate the delimitation of each Industrial Revolution.

Source: Compiled by the author

In addition to the United States, many international actors such as the *European Union (EU)* have recently noted that *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)* is one of the most severe threats of the contemporary security environment, aiming at the erosion of the democratic way of life. To be more precise, the EU defines FIMI as:

“[...] a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory” (EEAS, 2024).

Moreover, NATO's latest *Strategic Foresight Analysis* (SFA) underlines that cooperation between actors in the future will most probably be limited (ACT, 2024:15), competition will be pervasive taking advantage of all domains and dimensions (ACT, 2024:19), and that technology will eventually change the character of warfare through the use of autonomous multi-domain networked platforms, characterising our age as the 'Age of AI' and emerging & disruptive technologies (EDTs) as one of the main drivers of change (ACT, 2024:35). It also notes that the exploitation of insufficiently governed global commons –such as space and cyberspace– will be at the center of every actors' policy in order to gain strategic advantage (ACT, 2024:57), leading to an international order in transition (ACT, 2024:66). The 2023 SFA inter alia refers that:

“The Age of AI and the convergence of Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs) will reshape states, societies and armed forces as well as the character of competition and warfare with unprecedented speed. Competition is extending to virtual and cognitive dimensions and increasingly taking shape in the non-geographical space and cyber domains with new converging effects. [...] Additionally, accelerating technology development and changing public-private nexus will profoundly impact security and military matters. Converging effects across operational domains as well as physical and non-physical dimensions will expand the scope and profoundly shape the character of competition” (ACT, 2024:7).

Of course the conclusions of NATO's 2023 SFA is of no surprise, as the President of the Russian Federation had already stressed in 2017 the importance of AI stating that:

“Artificial intelligence is the future not only of Russia but of all of mankind [...] There are huge opportunities, but also threats that are difficult to foresee today [...] Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world” (Gigova, 2017).

The Theory of Hyperland

Taking into consideration the aforementioned facts, it is evident that –despite the fact that armed conflicts and military dominance are still part of the contemporary geopolitical environment– major actors are more interested in gaining technological superiority in order to prevail in the domains of space, cyberspace and information space, an action that will allow them to impose their will to third actors. This behaviour though, is not justified by Mackinder's theory which emphasizes on land

power and the control of the Heartland or Spykman's theory which emphasizes on maritime power and the control of the Rimland. This is exactly why a new geopolitical theory needs to be established, in order to provide a framework for interpreting major geopolitical actors' actions.

Hyperland is a new geopolitical theory introduced by the author for the first time, in order to interpret the new strategic competition between major international actors that strive to gain dominance in *space*, *cyberspace* and the *informational space*. Etymologically, the word 'Hyperland' is comprised of the Greek word 'υπέρ' which means 'over' and the English word 'land', and is the geopolitical imaginary space that comprises the domains of *space*, *cyberspace* and *informational space* that surround the globe (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Graphic design of the theory of Hyperland



Source: PNGEGG (n.d.)

Its basic principal is that –given the fact that most of the contemporary means of hard and soft power used by major geopolitical actors are closely related to technology in addition to the fact that these actors use the aforementioned means in the context of their respective strategies– the main goal in the contemporary geopolitical arena for every actor is to gain control in space, cyberspace and/or the information space, as its dominance in this domains will eventually lead to the control of the World-Island. In other words, the author suggests that:

Who controls the Hyperland rules both Heartland and Rimland, thus commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.

Table 2. The main elements of the geopolitical theories of Heartland, Rimland & Hyperland

NAME OF THEORY	YEAR OF CONCEPTION	FOCUSED DOMAIN	FOCUSED GEOGRAPHICAL REGION	MAJOR GEOPOLITICAL ACTORS AT THE TIME
Heartland	1904/1919	Land	Central Eurasia	USA Russia
Rimland	1942	Maritime	Coastal South Eurasia	USA Russia
Hyperland	2024	Space Cyberspace Information space	Globe	USA China Russia

Source: Compiled by the author

Evidence from Major Geopolitical Actors' Strategic Documents

The new theory of Hyperland is verified by the context of several strategic documents that were recently issued by major geopolitical actors, as they emphasize on developing new capabilities in the space, cyberspace and information space domains not only to counter the respective threats posed by other actors but also to enable them to exploit these domains in the best possible ways in order to promote their interests.

One of these documents is the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation that was issued in 2021, in which '*the development of a safe information space*' is defined as one of Russia's national interests, while '*information security*' and '*scientific and technological development*' are defined as two of Russia's strategic national priorities (Cooper, 2021). Moreover, the latest *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* defines as one of Russia's national interests '*to develop safe information space, protect Russian society against destructive informational and psychological influence*', as one of its strategic tasks '*to ensure Russia's interests in the world's oceans, space and airspace*' and as one of its priorities '*Ensuring the interests of the Russian Federation in the World Ocean, outer space and airspace*' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). To sum up, as far as Russia's perception of information space –which is conceived as a combination of cyberspace, (tele)communications network, websites and technologies (Hakala & Melnychuk, 2021:6)– is concerned, it must be understood that:

“[...] Russia perceives the information space in very geopolitical terms, with their domestic information space representing a continuation of territorial state borders, which they view as constantly being violated by foreign intrusions” (Hakala & Melnychuk, 2021:7).

The same applies for the Republic of France, as its *National Strategic Review* that was issued in 2022 defines ‘*First-class cyber resilience*’ as its fourth strategic objective (Republic of France, 2022:39), ‘*The capacity to defend and act in hybrid threats*’ as its ninth strategic objective (Republic of France, 2022:48) and ‘*Freedom of action and the capacity to conduct military operations, including high-intensity operations in all fields (multi-environment and multi-field)*’ as its tenth strategic objective (Republic of France, 2022:50), referring that:

“Common spaces (cyber, space, seabed and air-sea spaces) are now the subject of renewed competition for power. Actions that have already been taken in these spaces reflect the adoption by all States of an approach that is applied to these spaces across the full trio of competition, dispute and confrontation. Their operational and geographic importance is growing while the shared rules governing them are insufficient, weakened or contested” (Republic of France, 2022:12).

The first-ever National Security Strategy of Germany also defined resilience as a key capacity for its national security, setting the protection and promotion of technology and innovation (The Federal Government, 2023:57), cybersecurity (The Federal Government, 2023:59), and the exploitation of outer space (The Federal Government, 2023:62) as some of the basic ways to achieve it, referring that:

“The extent, frequency and scope of cyberattacks are increasing. This shows that security risks and international conflicts can also originate in the digital sphere. Ever more frequently, cyberattacks seek to destabilise our government and society, or our partners’ governments and societies. Furthermore, in cyberspace there are no geographical limits to crime, terrorism, espionage or sabotage; the potential damage is immense, and can only be ascribed to specific actors with considerable difficulty” (Germany, 2023:25)

The importance of *technology* is also stressed in the aforementioned 2022 National Security Strategy of the United States, noting that it is central to the contemporary geopolitical competition in order to safeguard the US national security, economy and democracy (The White House, 2022:32). As far as the strategic domains of *cyber space* and *space* the document underlines that securing cyberspace is vital for national security as society and its critical infrastructure is nowadays digital, thus vulnerable to cyberattacks (The White House, 2022:34) and that the United States rely on space systems in order to maintain critical national and homeland security, referring that:

“Space exploration and use benefits humanity, from creating economic opportunities to developing new technologies and enabling climate surveillance. America will maintain our position as the world’s leader in space and work alongside the international community to ensure the domain’s sustainability, safety, stability, and security” (The White House, 2022:34).

One the major geopolitical actors that also emphasizes on the importance of technology, space, cyberspace and information space is the United Kingdom (UK). In its 2023 Integrated Review Refresh entitled ‘Responding to a more contested and volatile world’ the UK government defines science and technology as one of the UK’s core national priority that needs to be developed in order to gain strategic advantage (HM Government, 2023:14), also expressing the intention to shape rules in the emerging digital and technology order, cyberspace and space (HM Government, 2023:28) and enhance the capabilities of the UK’s cyber and space forces in order to enhance its integrated deterrence (HM Government, 2023:34), identifying cyber security and resilience as the UK’s fourth priority area (HM Government, 2023:50).

Finally, it needs to be noted that the ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the attempt of major actors to gain dominance in the information space in order to influence public opinion and justify their actions. To be more precise, Russia has been accusing the West for its overall ‘anti-Russian’ policy part of which is NATO’s expansion to the East (Koukakis, 2024), leading NATO to create in its official website a special section entitled ‘*Setting the record straight: De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO*’ (NATO, 2024), stressing that:

“Russia wants to establish spheres of influence and control other countries through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means – including disinformation – against

NATO Allies and partners. NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia. The Alliance will continue to respond to Russian threats and actions in a united and responsible way. We are strengthening our deterrence and defence, supporting our partners, and enhancing our resilience. This includes calling out Russia's actions and countering disinformation.”

The same way to address Russian disinformation has been chosen by the EU, which in 2015 established a special website entitled ‘EUvsDiSiNFO’ in order to forecast, address and respond to Russia’s disinformation campaign by increasing public awareness and facilitate Europeans’ resistance to information manipulation (EUvsDiSiNFO, n.d.). Moreover, the EU –having recognised space as a strategic domain– issued in 2023 its first ever Space Strategy for Security and Defence (EEAS, 2023) referring that:

“In the current geopolitical context of increasing power competition and intensification of threats, the EU is taking action to protect its space assets, defend its interests, deter hostile activities in space and strengthen its strategic posture and autonomy” (European Commission, n.d.).

Concluding Remarks

Taking into consideration the data presented in this article, it is vident that the new strategic domains that contribute to the enhancement of a state’s national power are undoubtedly the unconventional domains of space, cyberspace and information space. In this context, the major geopolitical actors’ attempt to gain dominance in these domains –neglecting the conventional land, maritime and air domain– is totally justified by the Hyperland theory which argues that who controls these three domains commands the world. To conclude, even though the age of ‘*bots on the ground*’ (Rossiter, 2020) might not be so close as it seems, it is evident that strategic competition has changed form, leading major actors to novel behaviours that will eventually change the geopolitical status quo as we know it.

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