

Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century

Multipolarity and the revolution in strategic perspective

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**For Amy,
My unrelated little sister**

Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century

This book argues that in the twenty-first century Eastern Eurasia will replace Europe as the theater of decision in international affairs, and that this new geographic and cultural context will have a strong influence on the future of world affairs.

For half a millennium, the great powers have practised what might be called “world politics,” yet during that time Europe, and small portions of the Near East and North Africa strategically vital to Europe, were the “centers of gravity” in international politics. This book argues that the “unipolar moment” of the post-Cold War era will not be replaced by a US–China “Cold War,” but rather by a long period of multipolarity in the twenty-first century. Examining the policy goals and possible military–political strategies of several powers, this study explains how Washington may play a key role in Eastern Eurasian affairs if it can learn to operate in a very different political context.

This book also considers the rapid pace of technological change and how it will impact on great power politics. Considering India, China, the United States, Russia, Japan, and other countries as part of a multipolar system, this book addresses the central questions that will drive US policy in the coming decades.

This book will be of great interest to students of international security, military history, geopolitics, and international relations.

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Introduction

New powers and old politics

The chief purpose of this work is to argue that the world political system is presently undergoing a fundamental transformation. This change has two distinct, but related, aspects: the end of the era that the great geopolitician Halford Mackinder termed the Columbian Epoch to a Post-Columbian Epoch and the shifting of the geographical center of gravity in international politics from Europe to an area referred to herein as Eastern Eurasia. This book explores the broad implications for world politics of these tectonic changes, with particular attention to how the United States might cope with them and maintain its position as the preeminent power in the world despite the passing of its ephemeral “unipolar moment.”¹

In a paper presented to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, Mackinder argued that the era of exploration, which he termed the Columbian Epoch, was ending, and that the world was becoming a “closed political system.”² At the same time, he warned, technology (particularly the development of intricate rail networks) was again making it possible for the Heartland – the core of Eurasia, the place from which, in previous centuries, wave after wave of nomadic invaders threatened the European Rimland – to menace the seapowers of Western Europe. In short, Mackinder believed that a long era was coming to an end, and that a new age, filled with peril, was being born.

This author contends that Mackinder was largely correct in his broad analysis, even if he was mistaken in certain specifics, and that his warning about the passing of the Columbian Epoch provides a good starting point for a geopolitical analysis of how world politics will likely develop in coming decades.

Mackinder and the Cold War

In retrospect, one might argue that there were two small but significant flaws in the analysis that led Mackinder to believe that the Columbian Epoch was imminently coming to an end, and that it would likely be followed by a period of Heartland supremacy over the European seapowers. First, he perhaps underestimated the capability of a mighty offshore seapower – the United States – to protect the declining European seapowers from the Heartland power. However, the history of the mid-twentieth century demonstrates just how close Mackinder’s fears came to being fulfilled.

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Nazi Germany made a very serious, and quite nearly successful, attempt to unseat the Soviet Union as the Heartland tenant and make itself the master of Europe from the English Channel to the Urals. This vast superpower would have commanded the majority of the world's industrial production, a very sizable chunk of its manpower, and all the natural resources necessary eventually to establish itself as the hegemon of the entire planet. Berlin failed catastrophically in this enterprise, and as a result the Red Army was able to flow out of the Heartland fortress and fill the power vacuum created in East-Central Europe by the destruction of Germany and exhaustion of France and Britain. As it consolidated its control over its new colonial possessions, Moscow kept its economy on a war footing and appeared poised to expand westward. The United States, however, effectively chose to abandon permanently its usual isolation from Continental politics and act as the protector of those European countries that had not yet been absorbed into the Soviet imperium. The result, of course, was the Cold War, and the United States successfully held Moscow at bay until the Soviet Union expired and the bulk of the Heartland was inherited by a reborn, but relatively weak, Russia.

Mackinder's second omission is intimately related to the first: he paid insufficient attention to the possibility that, while technological developments had placed the seapowers in a vulnerable position, further advances might serve to provide them with new and powerful defenses. A number of critical technological advances occurred in the mid-twentieth century: nuclear (and later thermonuclear) weapons, long-range bombers, and, eventually, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) were all developed and fielded. For the first time, immense damage could be done to the interior of the Heartland without a single soldier setting foot on its soil. The fact that it was the United States that enjoyed a technological lead during the early part of the Nuclear Age likely is highly significant; one shudders when contemplating how world history might have developed if the USSR had held an atomic monopoly during the critical years of the late 1940s. Again, if Mackinder was wrong, it was only by a little, and it is very easy to imagine how a Hitler or a Stalin might have been able to leverage control of the Heartland and thus gain mastery over the world.

Mercifully, however, the West survived, and even thrived. Despite its traditional reticence to involve itself in Eurasian affairs, the United States proved to be a surprisingly competent protecting power. However, it should be remembered that it was not merely the competence of the United States that determined the outcome of the Cold War; the shortcomings of the Soviet Union were equally important. Despite their Leninism, and even after they had built an awesome nuclear arsenal while still maintaining an overwhelming conventional advantage against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Soviet leaders never could quite bring themselves to do that for which they were supremely well-prepared, invading Western Europe. Moreover, despite possessing the resources of the Heartland, the Soviet Union proved unable to compete over the long term with a superpower foe possessing a far more efficient free market economy.

Although the militarily overmuscled Soviet state collapsed internally, this was not foreordained. There is no iron rule of history holding that empires must stand idle while more nimble foes beat them – indeed, such behavior is unusual, especially for a polity as well-armed and unashamedly aggressive as the USSR. Under proper circumstances, the Cold War might have been nothing more than an interwar period akin to that between the first two world wars; indeed, it is likely that in the months before his death Stalin was laying the groundwork for an eventual war against the United States.³ American leaders do deserve credit for implementing a containment policy that proved successful, but it would be naïve to assume that because their policy *did* work that, therefore, it *had* to work. Soviet leaders *chose* not to initiate a third world war, just as surely as Hitler decided to launch World War II, under conditions that arguably were far less favorable to Germany than those that Moscow enjoyed in, say, the late 1970s.

Of course, it is also possible that a Soviet adventure in Europe would have ended in Moscow's defeat or a nuclear exchange so great as to shatter the two superpowers, as well as many other states. The purpose, herein, is not to argue that Heartland dominance of Eurasia was well-nigh foreordained, but somehow, miraculously, avoided. Rather, the seapower-oriented NATO alliance triumphed thanks to some combination of specific economic, military, and other advantages, the wisdom of its leaders, and simple good luck. The key point is that even before World War I Mackinder saw a threat emanating from the Heartland that was very real; his concern that a motivated Heartland tenant might emerge as the hegemon of Eurasia was valid, and the fact that he understood this threat before Germany even had made the first of its two bids for Heartland dominance, and long before the Cold War, showed extraordinary foresight.

The death of the Columbian Epoch

Because the seapowers proved more resilient than Mackinder thought likely, the Columbian Epoch did not end in a disastrous *Götterdämmerung*, and a cruel new era of German or Soviet world hegemony did not emerge. Instead, the period from approximately 1914 to 1991, particularly the years from 1945 onward, should be seen as one of Epochal decline – the slow degeneration of the Columbian Epoch and the transition to a new era, which is referred to herein as the Post-Columbian Epoch, a term that Mackinder himself used (albeit with a slightly different timeframe in mind). During these years, a long-enduring Euro-centric multipolar great power system finally disintegrated, the victim of a series of political earthquakes that resulted from tectonic pressures that had been building for centuries.

The first of these events was World War I. Despite the damage that it inflicted on the continental powers, the war itself did not destroy the multipolar system. The war and its aftermath did, however, lay the groundwork for the collapse of the old order (of which multipolarity was a critical aspect). The war killed, outright, two relatively weak, but nonetheless important, players in the European

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order, the Austrian and Ottoman Empires, and indirectly replaced the Heartland tenant with a new and more dangerous one, as the Russian Empire transformed into the Soviet Union. The latter transition is particularly notable. Russia was always somewhat of an odd duck in the European system, Christian and thus more-or-less recognized (unlike the Ottoman Empire) as a “proper” European power, but with a culture and history strikingly different in many respects from that of Central and, especially, Western Europe. Yet, with the transfer of power to the Bolsheviks, Russia became, paradoxically, both more and less “European.” It was more European in the sense that it had thrown off its rather outmoded monarchal autocracy and replaced it with a system based on the supposed cutting edge in Western thought – Marxist scientific socialism, a mode of socio-political organization that, in the eyes of its many proponents, was the inevitable (and enticing) future. Russia had, however, become less European in the sense that it had now clearly set itself against the institutions and governments of the West, creating a Soviet Civilization intended to supplant its Western predecessor.

In the aftermath of the Great War, other “new modes and orders” (to borrow Machiavelli’s phrase) developed. Fascism, which is often presented as the antithesis of Communism but more accurately is described as its intellectual first cousin,⁴ emerged in Italy, and National Socialism, a particularly malevolent fascist variant, developed in Germany.⁵ In the ensuing World War II, control of the Heartland was contested by two powers of the very kind that Mackinder most feared. Previously, he had expressed his concern that the Heartland would fall under the control of a power sufficiently competent to organize the Heartland’s resources efficiently, and ruthless enough then to use those resources to gain hegemony over all Eurasia.⁶ Both the USSR and Germany potentially fitted this description. Although Germany presented the greater immediate threat to the states of Western Europe, the outcome of World War II was hardly reassuring. Throughout the Columbian Epoch, a multipolar system had endured on the European continent; despite occasional changes in the lineup of players (Spain and the Netherlands dropping from the ranks of the great powers, for example) the system remained fundamentally unchanged. The events of the first half of the twentieth century, however, smashed this apparatus beyond all repair. The war catastrophically damaged the international status of the Axis Powers. An invaded and partitioned Germany obviously had been removed from the ranks of the great powers; Italy, which had never actually been a great power but had pretended to that status, was reduced to a punchline for jokes about military incompetence; and Japan, the only non-European great power other than the United States (and, in any case, never more than a marginal player in events in Europe) was forced to renounce war as an instrument of state policy. The irreversible decline of Britain and France was not immediately and overwhelmingly obvious – a reality attested to by the fact that both powers have permanent seats on the UN Security Council – but it soon became clear that both countries were no longer great powers in any reasonable sense of the term.

It should be emphasized that it was not inevitable that multipolarity would be

replaced by a bipolar system with two superpowers; there was no geopolitical clock that was predestined to strike midnight in 1945. Throughout (and even before) the period under discussion, human actors made decisions that sped the collapse of multipolarity. If they had made different decisions, it is entirely conceivable that multipolarity would have endured even to today (and, indeed, that the Soviet Union itself would never have come into existence). Any notion that bipolarity eventually *had* to take hold because Washington and Moscow were simply so much larger in population and resources than countries such as Britain, France, and Germany is excessively reductionist. Moreover, such thinking ignores the vitally important ways in which smaller powers can shape the international political landscape. For example, a Germany that had not been exhausted by its mad adventure of 1939–1945 would have been a very different power, as would Britain and France if they had not expended much treasure building oversized colonial empires of dubious strategic value, then proceeded to spend vast resources in two exhausting wars, and followed these decisions by implementing expensive domestic welfare schemes. Indeed, it is all too easy to forget the proximate cause of World War I itself: the Austrian Empire, a great power clinging to that status by the tips of its fingernails, felt it necessary to make war on Serbia in order to protect its interests in the Balkans and its national prestige. The actions of such lesser powers as Romania, Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire played a considerable role in shaping the international security environment during and after 1914,⁷ a fact that should be kept in mind when pondering the dynamics of a multipolar environment.

Nevertheless, the destruction of the multipolar order was the outcome of the cataclysms of the early twentieth century, and the resulting bipolar Cold War is best understood as the “deathbed era” of the Columbian Epoch. *Central and Western Europe remained, strategically speaking, the geographical center of great power competition, but the most powerful polities no longer were inhabitants of that region – they were outside powers, not of the European Rimland, but acting on it.* The struggle over Europe was still the struggle for the world (a theme explored in greater detail in Chapter 2), but the age of Central and Western European primacy had passed.

The Post-Columbian Epoch

It is argued, herein, that the Columbian Epoch ended in a rather bizarre anticlimax on Christmas Day 1991, when the USSR was officially dissolved; the Communist Heartland tenant, which throughout its existence had been paranoid about the danger that outside powers presented to it, committed suicide. Using this precise date as a cutoff admittedly is arbitrary; Epochal shifts are not instantaneous. Italian sculptors and painters did not all wake up one morning and begin creating beautiful art because the Renaissance officially had begun; similarly, in many respects the international security environment changed little with the formal collapse of Soviet power. Nonetheless, the 1991 date is a good boundary line for two reasons. First, the Soviet Union made a serious bid to

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become the sole global hegemon, but its Russian successor cannot plausibly accomplish such a goal (although Russia conceivably may be part of a future coalition that will seek world hegemony). This is a geopolitical change of no small import – at least for the time being, the Heartland power presents little threat to any Western industrialized country, much less to Eurasia as a whole, when it is acting alone. Second, the end of bipolarity opened the way for American dominance in world politics – a period of unipolarity.

This unipolar system will not long endure. The Cold War was a time of transition out of an Epoch generally marked by multipolarity; the current unipolar era is a transition period into another Epoch that will also, generally, be multipolar. Moreover, American unipolarity will not last nearly so long as the Cold War did; already it is crumbling (witness the international opposition to the war in Iraq), and in no more than a couple of decades the international system again will be marked by a robust multipolarity. The Post-Columbian Epoch will, however, in some respects be radically different from its predecessor.

First, and central to the argument of this work, the geographic center of world politics will be Eastern Eurasia, a region (or, perhaps more accurately, a “meta-region”) which includes both the Asia-Pacific and South Asia. Its western border can be envisioned as a line running from Pakistan to China’s border with Kazakhstan, and then dividing the Central Siberian Plateau from the Western Siberian Plain; to the east, it is easiest to imagine its border as the 180°E longitudinal line (save for a small piece of Siberia east of this line, which should also be considered part of the region). Thus, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand are contained in Eastern Eurasia.

This population of Eastern Eurasia and its commercial importance (which continues to grow rapidly) alone would make it vitally important, but the region’s geopolitical significance results from more than demographic and economic statistics. Critically, it is emerging as the core of world political struggle – the home to a majority of the great powers,⁸ and the place where the most vital political struggles of this century will occur. It was not coincidental that the two world wars (and before that, the Seven Years’ War and other conflicts of worldwide significance) were centered in Europe, as events in that region shaped those worldwide – to achieve hegemony in Europe was a prerequisite to world hegemony.

At this point, it is useful to consider the intellectual contribution of the great Dutch-American geopolitician Nicholas J. Spykman, whose ideas differed from Mackinder’s in several key respects. Most importantly, for the purposes at hand, Spykman reversed Mackinder’s assumption that control of the Heartland was the prerequisite to control of the world. In this conception, control of what Spykman referred to as the Eurasian Rimland (roughly analogous to Mackinder’s Inner or Marginal Crescent), was in fact the key to world power. Spykman was ahead of his time; he very likely overestimated the power potential of the Rimland at the time that he was writing, while underestimating the significance of the Heartland. When Spykman died, in 1943, Western and Central Europe was approaching strategic exhaustion, while the Asia-Pacific region (with the obvious

exception of Japan) was not yet a major center of world political power. The Soviet collapse and the rise of China and India, however, have made Spykman's vision increasingly relevant, while diminishing the salience of Mackinder's.⁹ In this century it is quite likely that the former's response to the latter's arguments regarding the struggle between the Eurasian heartland and its periphery – “If there is to be a slogan for the power politics of the Old World, it must be ‘Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world’”¹⁰ – will be a guiding geopolitical principle.

The Heartland certainly is still geopolitically significant, but it is now most unlikely that control of that area can be leveraged into control of the world. Rather, we are entering a period akin to the early part of the Columbian Epoch in several respects. A number of great powers will compete in a very fluid political arena; for reasons subsequently described in detail, one should not expect “hard” alliances of the kind that marked the Cold War. Moreover, sheer mass will not guarantee success in the new political environment; as in the early Columbian years, intellectual nimbleness and a willingness to adopt new technologies (and accept the risks that accompany those technologies) will be vital. Indeed, one might describe the emerging era as “the Columbian Epoch on fast-forward” – powers will have to be enormously versatile and ruthless to compete successfully in an environment in which technological, social, and economic change will occur far more rapidly than at any previous time in human history. History's scrap heap will grow taller in the coming decades as flawed ideas and failed polities are piled onto it. Those powers that compete successfully, however, will receive the rewards of security, prosperity (on a scale that most humans living today barely can conceive), and an opportunity to shape the future of humankind.

The center of the action

As Europe was in previous centuries, Eastern Eurasia will be *the* major center of geopolitical activity in this one. It is here that states will struggle for regional dominance and, ultimately, world power. Eastern Eurasia is the most economically, geographically, and strategically significant area of the world, and the only one of the three most important global geographic centers of power that is politically “up for grabs.”

Of the two other centers of world economic and political power, one is overwhelmingly dominated by the United States and the other is consolidating both politically and economically. The North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA) is strategically stable, save for relatively minor issues, such as guerrilla violence in southern Mexico and the possibility that Quebec will secede from Canada; in any event, these and similar problems do not threaten Washington's dominant position in North America. The institutions of the European Union (EU), on the other hand, increasingly dominate Europe. Recent setbacks to the European project notwithstanding, it is entirely possible that Brussels *eventually* will succeed in its long-term goal of consolidating economic and foreign policy

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authority. However, even if the EU should collapse entirely (a most unlikely prospect), that still would not necessarily undermine European peace: its peoples appear to lack the stomach for another great war, and those states that could conceivably vie for power, such as Germany, France, and Britain, are not violently antagonistic toward each other. At the same time, Russia, presently, is too weak to threaten EU members and appears to have abandoned Soviet fantasies of conquering Europe outright. It is only in the Balkans, at the margins of Europe, and to the south, in simmering North Africa, that serious violence threatens in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, turmoil in those areas would not fundamentally undermine the strategic order that reigns in Western and Central Europe.

Many of the countries in other regions of the world – sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Central America, Central Asia, and the Middle East – contain important resources, straddle trade routes, or are otherwise strategically noteworthy. However, none of these areas has the compelling combination of wealth, population, and strategic geography that would make them likely arenas for great power competition with the highest stakes.¹¹ Obviously, much of the world's energy reserves are contained in the Middle East and Central Asia, but great power competition in central Eurasia will be of a different character than on its eastern rim.

In the central and south-central portions of Eurasia, outside powers attempt to influence the availability, movement, and price of energy resources; additionally, the United States takes a special interest in the continued survival of a close ally (Israel) and the development of stable, America-friendly governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are important questions, but they are secondary to the struggle over hegemony in Eastern Eurasia – the relative place of great powers at the high table of international politics will be decided in the latter contest. If China emerges as the undisputed hegemon of Eastern Eurasia (a far-from-certain outcome, for reasons discussed in detail in Chapter 4), it will not only be the predominant power in Asia, but clearly the greatest power in the world.

Eastern Eurasia today includes four countries that plausibly might be described as great powers (India, Japan, China, and Russia),¹² as well as a panoply of medium powers, several of which are wealthy and technologically advanced (including South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan). Many of the world's goods are produced, and much of its energy and food consumed,¹³ by the billions of people who live there, and the region certainly is not receding in importance.

In the Columbian Epoch, the character of the international system and the status of its individual players were decided in Europe. In the current age, Eastern Eurasia will be the geopolitical center of the world. The struggles that occur there will determine which states grow more powerful and which weaken, or even die. *It is here that any great power wars in this century will likely be centered*; the Stalingrads and Waterloos of tomorrow will be in Eastern Eurasia rather than Europe. Moreover, it should be considered highly, if not overwhelmingly, probable that great power wars in fact will occur.¹⁴

Optimists would consider this viewpoint misguided, if not heretical –

certainly, it is not the sort of thing that one says during a cocktail party at the UN Secretary General's apartment (at least if one wishes to be invited back). However, the arguments for enduring great power peace are less than compelling. One of the most popular is the assertion that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) has made war between parties possessing such weapons so risky that they will avoid armed struggle. Alternately, one can argue that trade and the complexity of the international supply chains on which today's multinational corporations rely makes war so patently unwise that major states will avoid it, or that various international institutions so constrain the behavior of such polities that they may rattle sabers but will go no further. The truly ebullient might even argue that democratic states never go to war and that within a few decades all of the significant powers will be democratic.

Any of these arguments *may* be true, but skepticism is advisable, as they are all unproven. The simple fact is that, regardless of how much data political scientists may marshal in the defense of their theories or how elegant their analyses may be, the history used to support them is a short and atypical one. It is true that the Cold War era was a "peaceful" one in the sense that the United States and the Soviet Union did not go to war with each other, but – as noted above – bipolarity itself is unusual in recent centuries. Moreover, from 1914 to 1953 Russia/the Soviet Union experienced two world wars, a civil war, and very vigorous internal oppression, planned famine, and purges; the cost of all this will never be known, but numerous tens of millions of Russian/Soviet lives were cut short in these years. This decades-long horror show surely had some influence on subsequent Soviet decisionmaking (though, notably, it did not prevent the USSR from undertaking actions, such as the secret deployment of nuclear weapons to Cuba, which carried a substantial risk of war with the United States). The other superpower was essentially defensively oriented – despite occasional bold talk of Communist rollback, Washington never mustered the will necessary, for example, to support self-liberated Hungarians in 1956 or Czechs in 1968 – and inclined to accept the existence of the Soviet Union as at least a semi-permanent strategic condition. Though their political philosophies were diametrically opposed, for an enormous variety of reasons neither superpower ever made the decision to launch a war against its counterpart. While one might like to draw from the Cold War the lesson that after 1945 great power war became impossible, that conclusion would be based on perilously thin evidence. A simple thought experiment illustrates the point: supposing that Party Secretary Stalin had lived for an additional ten years, or even five, would one be *very confident* that there would never have been a third world war?

If the United States is to retain its superpower status, rather than declining into a "regional power on steroids," potent in the Western Hemisphere but possessing little influence over the most critical international questions, Washington must not only remain active in Eastern Eurasia, but also successfully adapt its foreign policy to emerging realities. However alluring the notion of permanent American unipolarity may be, it is an illusion. Multipolarity is reemerging, and if the United States should attempt to deal with major allies as it did in the Cold

War, it will marginalize itself. The most important potential American allies in Eastern Eurasia will not be supplicants, as were the deeply wounded states of post-war Europe, but polities with a variety of alliance options. This does not imply, however, that the United States must, as some Americans appear to believe, tremble at the thought that some allies may disapprove of a given US policy. Indeed, as an outside power, in many cases Washington will enjoy a greater variety of strategic options than any Eastern Eurasian power will possess. American policymakers cannot expect to ensure the continuation of unipolarity, but, if they are wise, they may ensure that the Old World remains in balance and that no power can threaten the United States' position as the greatest of the great powers.

The revolution in strategic perspective

A number of technological revolutions are ongoing that will have an enormous impact on economics, society, and military affairs in this century. However, the impact of these technological changes will be far greater than most students of international affairs appreciate – greater, even, than a revolution in military affairs (RMA). As Chapter 5 argues, there is an ongoing RMA, which is referred to, herein, as the Second American RMA (the first having been the nuclear RMA that began in 1945). However, another, more fundamental and ultimately more important, revolution is taking place, an event referred to, herein, as a revolution in strategic perspective (RSP). While several RMAs may occur in a century, RSPs are far rarer – the last one occurred at the beginning of the Columbian Epoch as the concept of a unified world political system began to take hold in Europe.

The emerging RSP is intimately connected to the shift in the geographic center of world politics from Europe to Eastern Eurasia; indeed, the latter is an aspect of the RSP. This RSP should not, however, be understood chiefly as a matter of physical geography. The last RSP, as we shall see, was the result of the interaction of technology, which made regular transoceanic voyages practical, and the “mental universe” of European political elites, who came to see politics as global in character. This, in turn, resulted in the Columbian Epoch, and the establishment of Europe as the strategic center of the world. This RSP also relates to both geography and technology, perhaps in an even more complex fashion.

The aforementioned decline of the Eurocentric and multipolar international systems and the resulting move to bipolar, and then unipolar, systems, combined with the rise of several Eastern Eurasian powers, is a process that is inextricably tied to technological, social, and economic change. These various kinds of change themselves are deeply intertwined, of course, with developments in one area impacting the others. Technological development, however, will be a particularly critical catalyst for change of other kinds, including in the international political system. States will struggle to adapt to the enormous and very rapid technological changes that will occur in the early twenty-first century, and those that are most successful in doing so will reap outsized rewards.

In the last RSP, farsighted leaders integrated the fact that technology had fundamentally changed the structure of the international political system and adapted their paradigms accordingly, shifting mentally from a world of “regional international systems” to one with a single global international system. Leaders who did not make this shift consigned their polities to long-term decline. Twenty-first century leaders will be faced with a similarly daunting challenge, adapting their paradigms and policies to a period of “wild technology” that may overthrow seemingly reliable “formulas” for military success, economic prosperity, and social cohesion.

It should be remembered that Ottoman bureaucrats, Ming Mandarins, and other grandees who did not alter policy to account for a newly global political environment were not simply foolish – they merely continued to apply a *previously* successful strategic prescription, unaware of the fact that failure to adapt would have disastrous long-term consequences. Today, an American policy-maker might, apparently quite wisely, argue that the United States has enjoyed an enormously successful “run” for more than sixty years, and that it would be far too risky to alter either domestic or international policy radically. In another time, this might well be sound advice. However, given the changing international political environment, such a cautious course would, for reasons discussed herein, virtually ensure long-term decline. The international political system is dynamic, and developments that are not directly related to high state policy and military affairs nonetheless may prove, over time, to be of enormously great import to the health of individual powers and the structure of the system itself.

The argument

No author who endeavors to discuss issues of the sort studied in this book can address them in fine detail. In attempting to delve into, for example, the domestic politics, foreign policy, military potential, economic development, and other specifics of every country – or even of every great and medium power – in Eurasia, a recklessly brave writer would soon be buried under a mountain of detail. Thus, this work avoids, insofar as is practical, discussions of current foreign policy controversies, the present military capabilities of various Eastern Eurasian countries, and similar questions. For the most part, discussion of specific polities, other than the United States, has been limited to Chapters 3 and 4, and even then only some key countries are discussed in an effort to illuminate certain critical issues.

This work attempts to provide an overview of the geopolitical dynamics of this century, and thus the general characteristics of the international system are more important to the subject at hand than are the political developments specific to any given country. Even if, for example, China were to split into two states, or a large-scale nuclear conflict occurred between India and Pakistan, the *general* geopolitical analysis, herein, would still be valid, because even such major events would not change underlying geopolitical trends, even though it

would alter profoundly the fate of specific states. Again, the purpose, herein, is not to predict future events in detail, but merely to use geopolitical reasoning to sketch the outlines of the emerging international system.

Chapter 1 offers a brief discussion of the development of “classical” geopolitics, explaining why geopolitical tools are still useful in this century and defending geopolitics from some of the charges made against it – chiefly, that it is an overly deterministic and inherently imperialistic pseudo-science. It also makes the case that geopolitical analysis should not be seen as limited to physical geography; rather, geopolitics should incorporate all manner of knowledge related to human geography, and that, therefore, an understanding of broad socio-cultural, religious, technological, and other trends is critical to geopolitical understanding.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to explain the concept of RSP, using the last RSP, the global European political ascendancy that marked the Columbian Epoch, as a case study. This chapter builds on concepts first introduced by Sir Halford Mackinder over a hundred years ago, but uses the benefit of hindsight to propose modifications to his theory that account for why the previous century did not develop precisely as he might have expected. It argues that the Columbian Epoch in fact did not end in the early twentieth century, but rather underwent a long-term period of decline that concluded with the fall of the Soviet Union and that it is only in recent years that humanity has entered a Post-Columbian Epoch.

Chapter 3 discusses the reemergence of global multipolarity and its implications. Most importantly, the chapter explains why unipolarity is rapidly degrading and should be replaced by an environment in which numerous great powers vie for position. It provides a brief outline of the challenges facing some significant actors and of how great powers are likely to interact in a multipolar environment. In particular, Chapter 4 addresses China’s place in the emerging world political environment. It is argued that although it is probable that China will be the most muscular of the Eastern Eurasian great powers, it would be mistaken to assume that Washington and Beijing necessarily will face off against each other in a second cold war. While it is likely that the two powers will maintain an uneasy relationship, and it is entirely possible that eventually they will go to war, the chapter explains why the political-diplomatic environment in Eastern Eurasia will be far more complicated than the one that prevailed in Europe during the Cold War. The chapter also briefly notes the importance of interactions among great, medium, and small powers.

Chapter 4 draws on the previous analysis to present an Eastern Eurasian strategy for the United States in the early decades of the twenty-first century. In essence, the chapter argues that it is not practical, given the emerging multipolar character of international politics, either to maintain its present unipolar position or pursue a strategy based on a permanent, American-led multilateral alliance, similar to NATO, whose chief purpose would be to contain Chinese power. Rather, Washington will have to adapt to a strategic environment containing numerous strong powers, and should dedicate itself to ensuring that multipolar-

ity continues to develop in a healthy fashion, and that no single state or coalition becomes excessively powerful. If it does so, the United States may continue for many decades to be the most powerful individual state even as it lays down the burdens that it today carries as a global quasi-hegemon.

Chapter 5 focuses on the role of terrorists and other “strategic entrepreneurs” in the strategic environment of the twenty-first century. Most importantly, it addresses how the horizontal spread of technology is creating conditions in which seemingly weak and minor actors increasingly will have the capability to inflict enormous damage on great powers. In certain respects, this is nothing new – many powers have been damaged or even destroyed by movements led by previously-obscure rebels and prophets – the horizontal spread of highly lethal weaponry clearly creates new dangers with which the great powers must cope, and, most importantly, has implications for their mutual relationships. The chapter, far from displacing states as the most significant strategic players, argues that the most critical factor governing the importance of violent non-state actors in the world system will be whether and/or how great powers choose to use such actors against other.

Chapter 6 addresses the “next RMA” and how that RMA and the RSP are connected. It explores the significance of emerging technologies to the political and military landscape, and discusses why those technologies have enormous implications for global politics. Most importantly, it explores how technological development will be interwoven with social, political, economic, military, and other changes in this century, and explains why these changes are creating an environment ripe for an Epochal transformation in the strategic environment.

It should be emphasized that this work is one of “diagnosis,” not “treatment.” The book endeavors to describe the RSP and the conditions that created it; although its conclusion does outline some general “rules of thumb” for success in the Post-Columbian Epoch, it does not propose to offer precise solutions to the complex challenges that policymakers will confront. This author’s crystal ball is far too cloudy to permit such specificity. Certainly, the argument that an RSP is aborning is a bold one, but this book’s discussion of the strategic future is not calculatedly outrageous. It is argued that developments in biotechnology, robotics, nanotechnology, computer science, and other areas will have an enormous impact because, in the author’s judgment, that is the most prudent conclusion based on the available evidence. Given what is known today about these technologies and what can be inferred from that knowledge about their likely future development, the argument for massive change in human civilization, and thus on international political life, appears, at least to this observer, well-nigh invincible. Sir Halford understood very well indeed that technological change and geopolitical conditions were eternally interconnected, and if the technological “super-revolution” is as colossal as a reasonable observer might expect, it will alter geopolitical conditions profoundly.

1 Geopolitics in an uncertain world

The case for classical geopolitics

The importance of physical and political geography to international politics is self-evident. The influence of climate, access (or lack of access) to resources, national agricultural potential, and similar factors have an obvious influence on the development of polities. It would, for example, make no sense to discuss Icelandic history without reference to the facts that Iceland is an island, was accessible to Vikings in longboats, and today is strategically significant to any polity that wishes to control access to the Atlantic.

The characteristics of a country's neighbors are of great importance. Different geographic "neighborhoods" have unique histories and face very different issues – and, just as with residential areas in a city, some neighborhoods are far more violent than others. It should, however, be noted that which geographical neighborhoods are violent and which are not can change radically over time. This is not to deny, because of enduring geographical reasons, that some territories are more likely to experience military activity than are others, but rather to note that changes in the international political environment can impact enormously the likelihood of military activity in a given area. For example, for many reasons, most definitely including geographic ones, the Low Countries region was a theater of frequent military activity for centuries, but today it is at peace because the European political environment has changed greatly in recent decades. If one were to be crudely deterministic and assume that neighboring countries invariably seek to expand territorially at the expense of relatively weak neighbors it would be very difficult to explain how Canada survived the twentieth century, but if one takes other considerations into account – particularly the foreign policy of the United States and its character as a polity – the fact that Canada continues to thrive is not at all surprising.

A region may be home to several great powers, as Europe was on the eve of World War I, or none – at present, there are no Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, or Central Asian great powers. The states that occupy a territory may be weak or powerful, populous or few, and culturally similar or dissimilar. The latter fact is notable – although geographical proximity *generally* correlates to cultural similarity it is possible for neighbors and near-neighbors to have little in common culturally. For instance, Israel and Saudi Arabia are far less distant geographically than are Israel and the United States, but, speaking broadly, the

Israelis share many cultural similarities with Americans while they are very different indeed from Saudis.

An unearned infamy: the reputation of classical geopolitics

Although most observers agree that geography is a significant factor in the development of politics and the interactions between them, the legitimacy of geopolitical analysis *per se* is frequently questioned. Geopolitics has long been derided as being overly deterministic and simplistic, if not inherently violent. This narrow view of geopolitics is unjust both to the field and its theorists – it represents a stereotype rather than an analysis. As in any field related to politics, geopolitics is populated by a variety of individuals who build theoretical paradigms, all of which presumably are flawed or incomplete in some respects. However, geopolitical thinkers, and particularly those from the Anglo-American school of thought described below, have made a contribution to our understanding of international politics far out of proportion to their modest numbers, and their work provides insights that can greatly assist those who seek to understand the broad trends that will drive international politics in the twenty-first century. The best geopolitical writing – like the works of a Sun Tzu, Thucydides, or Karl von Clausewitz – is valuable to students of international politics in any age.

Much of the hostility to geopolitics is the result of the association of the field with General Karl Haushofer and German *Geopolitik*, and some of the common criticisms of geopolitics are accurate when specifically aimed at *Geopolitik*.¹⁵ While the degree to which Haushofer and his associates influenced the foreign policy of the Third Reich is still debated, *Geopolitik* certainly was imperialistic in its orientation and Haushofer himself was willing to distort his analysis so as to maintain influence with the government that he served. Overall, *Geopolitik* lacks value as a method for understanding international politics,¹⁶ and Haushofer and his associates had little influence on Anglo-American geopolitics in his own time, much less today. Anglo-American geopoliticians never embraced Haushofer's work – even in the 1930s, *Geopolitik* was much-criticized outside of Germany and rejected as an intellectual fig leaf for military aggression.¹⁷

It would be difficult indeed to argue convincingly that Anglo-American geopolitical thought is infected by Nazism when two key “founding fathers” of twentieth century Anglo-American geopolitics, Sir Halford Mackinder and Nicholas J. Spykman, were explicitly anti-Nazi, while a third, US Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, was a professed democrat who died before the creation of the National Socialist movement. Haushofer's geopolitical views were clearly influenced by Mackinder's work, but Mackinder cannot justly be indicted for the intellectual excesses of a German counterpart who was never even his student in any formal sense. (Indeed, largely because of its association with Haushofer and his disciples, Mackinder disliked the term “geopolitics” itself, preferring instead simply to refer to his field as political geography.) Although there have been many attempts to toss the Anglo-American geopolitical tradition along with

German *Geopolitik* into a common category,¹⁸ there are critical differences between them, one of which is that Haushofer's work explicitly favored German territorial aggrandizement – essentially a prescription for great power war.¹⁹

In addition, the fact that the Anglo-American geopoliticians were offering counsel to democratic governments and were explicitly attempting to undermine the power of tyrannical states surely must weigh in their favor. (The British Empire and the United States, imperfect though they were, were unquestionably the moral superiors of Haushofer's Nazi Germany.) Most major twentieth-century geopoliticians had strong ideas about policy and wished to see their ideas implemented by government policymakers. This is certainly true of Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman, perhaps the three most significant figures in early twentieth century Anglo-American geopolitics, who were all active members of the policy/academic elite. Mahan was a career officer (although most of his voluminous literary output was penned after his retirement from the US Navy) with very strongly held beliefs about both military preparedness and foreign policy. In addition to his active academic career, Mackinder served the British government in various positions at different times, including service as a Member of Parliament (1910–1922) and British High Commissioner to South Russia (1919–1920).²⁰ Writing during World War II, Professor Spykman, a faculty member at Yale, sought to shape American policies related to the peace that should emerge out of the conflict. Thus, all three authors were deeply invested in the great political events of their time and sought to give advice that could be translated into international political power.

Geopolitics as counsel

Whether the fact that geopolitics, generally, has not been a disinterested scholarly endeavor undermines its usefulness as an analytical tool is itself important – but the answer to the question very much depends on one's viewpoint. If one takes the perspective that scholarship must be entirely neutral – and leaving aside the obvious question of whether human beings can be truly unbiased when writing about controversial matters and defending their viewpoints against those with whom they disagree – then most geopoliticians clearly fail this test, as would the overwhelming majority of political philosophers, foreign policy analysts, and other political writers. No one who was not heroically naïve would assume that John Locke did not care whether England maintained a parliamentary system of government or adopted despotic autocracy, or that George Kennan was entirely blasé about which bloc would win the Cold War.

Given the times in which they composed their influential works on geopolitics – Mahan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mackinder throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and Spykman in the middle of that century – it is unsurprising that the three authors, like most of their contemporaries, espouse many views that are today unfashionable in many quarters.²¹ Most importantly, their vision of political intercourse assumed that strong polities will tend to take advantage of weakness in their peers and that if it is to

ensure its survival and prosperity a state must be willing to act in a manner that some observers might consider ruthless or even thuggish.²²

One plausibly could contend that geopolitics does not concern itself sufficiently with questions outside the traditional understanding of power politics and therefore has a stilted worldview. Critical geopolitical analyst Gearóid Ó Tuathail boldly argues that:

The old conceptual maps of geopolitics do not work in a world of speeding flows, instantaneous information, and proliferating techno-scientific risks. Nevertheless, the urge to arrest this teeming complexity of our age by returning world politics to certain “fundamental axes” or “timeless truths” remains, merely the latest version of a long-standing countermodern impulse to (re)invent certainty in a world where the vertiginous “creative destruction” of transnational capitalist modernity dominates. . . . Like orthodox geopolitics, critical geopolitics is both a politically minded practice and a geopolitics, an explicitly political account of the contemporary geopolitical condition that seeks to influence politics. Unlike orthodox geopolitics, critical geopolitics has a much richer understanding of the problematic of “geopolitics” and a better conceptual grasp, I wish to argue, of the problems facing states in conditions of advanced modernity.²³

Criticisms of this character do not make a readily disprovable charge – they in essence argue that orthodox – or, to use the term preferred herein, classical – geopolitics offers an old-fashioned and blinkered view of the world, and one can just as easily argue that critical writings offer little that is of practical use in the understanding of relationships between states and their relation to geography. Ó Tuathail himself contends that, “Eschewing explicit interest in providing ‘advice to the prince,’ critical geopolitics critiques the superficial and self-interested ways in which orthodox geopolitics ‘reads the world political map’ by projecting its own cultural and political assumptions upon it while concealing these very assumptions.”²⁴ While one should note that the cultural and political assumptions of critical geopoliticians quite effectively can be hidden behind a Great Wall of jargon impenetrable to all but a tiny handful of initiates, Ó Tuathail does make an interesting distinction between the cultures of critical and classical geopolitics.

Despite a professed interest in “praxis,” critical geopoliticians thus far have had a negligible influence on policy. In contrast, the most significant Anglo-American classical geopoliticians succeeded, at least to a degree, in influencing policy.²⁵ Generally, it is quite clear when reading classical geopoliticians that the authors have strong views about the practical use of political and military power and that they wish policymakers to adopt their specific recommendations. Far from being a shadowy process, this is a straightforward attempt to influence the actions of the government officials and other opinion leaders addressed in the scholarship. Therefore, the major Anglo-American geopoliticians generally have used language accessible to the leaders of their day and offered suggestions they

believed to be practical given the political culture and economic, diplomatic, and military potential of the state to which they were offering advice. Thus, there is a major chasm between classical and critical geopoliticians: the former are engaged in an essentially practical enterprise – the advising of policymakers and other men and women of affairs – while the latter are engaged in a theoretical project whose logic and language is highly self-referential.

It should be, noted, however, that even many students of international affairs who describe themselves as “Realists” or “Neorealists” nonetheless believe classical geopolitics to be of little use as a tool of international political analysis. Indeed, in *Politics Among Nations* – the defining book for the “classical” or “human nature” school of Realist thought²⁶ – Hans Morgenthau is merciless in his criticism of geopolitics. He treats geopolitics, along with nationalism and militarism, as examples of what he calls “the fallacy of the single factor.” Morgenthau contends that:

Geopolitics is a pseudoscience erecting the factor of geography into an absolute that is supposed to determine the power, and hence the fate of nations. Its basic conception is space. Yet while space is static, the peoples living within the spaces of the earth are dynamic. According to geopolitics, it is a law of history that peoples must expand by “conquering space,” or perish, and that the relative power of nations is determined by the mutual relation of the conquered space. . . . Geopolitics only tells us what space is destined, because of its location relative to other space, to harbor the master of the world. It does not tell us to what particular nation that mastery will fall. . . . Geopolitics, as presented in the writings of Mackinder and [James] Fairgrieve had given a valid picture of one aspect of the reality of national power, a picture seen from the exclusive, and therefore distorting, angle of geography. In the hands of Haushofer and his disciples, geopolitics was transformed into a kind of political metaphysics to be used as an ideological weapon in the service of the national aspirations of Germany.²⁷

Morgenthau’s definition of Haushofer’s geopolitical project is not unreasonable, but his description of Mackinder and Fairgrieve is very misleading and his overall estimate of geopolitics is a caricature.

Mackinder notes in his 1904 lecture and article *The Geographical Pivot of History* that: “I recognize that I only arrive at one aspect of the truth, and I have no wish to stray into excessive materialism. Man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls. My concern is with the general physical control, rather than the causes of universal history. It is obvious that only a first approximation to truth can be hoped for.”²⁸ This certainly is not the argument of a crude geographical determinist.²⁹ It is fair to say that Mackinder, like other responsible geopoliticians, considered geography to be a key factor in the development of human societies, but did not believe that it was the sole important factor in international politics or that a proper understanding of political geography would allow entirely accurate prediction of future political events.³⁰

If geopoliticians actually claimed that the historical development of all societies and their institutions is simply and solely a matter of geography, geopolitics indeed would be a useless tool for understanding international politics because its premises would be reductionist to the point of absurdity. However, that is a far-from-accurate perspective whose pervasiveness highlights the “public relations” problem that classical geopolitics has faced for over half a century. Geopolitics has been defined by its opponents, with predictable results.

The usefulness of classical geopolitics

As one moves from a constricted view of geopolitics as a geographic pseudoscience to a consideration of the connection of geography to international politics it is important to acknowledge that the term “geopolitician” should not be restricted to a handful of individuals who explicitly or implicitly declare themselves to be such. Rather, it is appropriate to widen the term to encompass any political-strategic thinker who both acknowledges the importance of geography to international relations *and* whose work addresses in detail the interaction between the two. Thus, because his work demonstrates a deep awareness of the importance of geography and geographical relationships are central to his thought, a figure such as Admiral Mahan should be considered a geopolitical thinker even though he was not self-consciously a “geopolitician.”

By contrast, it would be misleading to refer to many strategic thinkers as geopoliticians because, regardless of the overall quality of their thought, their work does not dwell on the general importance of geography to the relationships among polities. It therefore would be inappropriate to consider thinkers such as Karl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Niccolò Machiavelli to be geopoliticians, though they all, in some fashion, address geography in their works. One might ask whether, if geography is vital to the development of polities and geopolitics provides a useful prism for the study of international politics, this necessarily implies that the works of non-geopoliticians are critically flawed. The answer is that this is not necessarily the case, as there is a distinction between a work that more-or-less is silent on the importance of geography in shaping the international political system over long periods of time and one that actively *denies* that geography is an important factor in international politics. For example, issues related to the impact of geography on power politics were peripheral to Clausewitz’s great project of describing the character of war and its place in international relations. Thus, when he discusses geography it generally is in the context of military operations.³¹

The contention herein is that an appreciation of geography is necessary, but not alone sufficient, to a proper understanding both of how polities develop over time and how they interact in the international system. Geography is central to international relationships for the simple reason that polities occupy, struggle over, and interact across space; there are, however, great issues of international relations that have little *direct* reference to geography, even if geography always is silently shaping the international system. Geopolitics is a useful tool for

understanding certain aspects of international relations, but it is certainly not a substitute for all other discussions of international politics – Sun Tzu’s attempt to enunciate core strategic principles and Machiavelli’s musings on the uses of power and the nature of *virtu* are outside the realm of geopolitics proper even if human affairs cannot be divorced from geography.³²

Very little of the analysis that crowds under the broad tent of international relations theory is essentially geopolitical in character or even informed significantly by the work of any of the major geopoliticians. This is unfortunate. Clearly, most modern international relations theorists generally have been resistant to geopolitics. First, the aforementioned issues regarding the reputation of geopolitical thought has been a significant barrier. Second, in recent decades there appears to have been relatively little cross-fertilization between geopolitically-minded thinkers and international relations theorists except in critical theory and related realms. (Indeed, geopolitics remained sufficiently obscure that Morgenthau was still caricaturing geopolitics in the fifth edition of his *magnum opus*, the last version that he edited before his death.) Third, dynamic geopolitical worldviews do not fit well with many of the conventions of international relations models. For understandable reasons, international relations theorists often are more concerned with theoretical elegance and general applicability than with the nuances of international political life. Geopolitical thought thus tends to fall between two stools: a very rigid geopolitical model might be theoretically elegant, but surely would have the reductionist vices that critics such as Morgenthau attribute to all geopolitical theories. Conversely, it would be difficult to fit a geopolitical discussion that attempted to account for the nuances of international political life, such as the impact of ideology and strategic culture on decisionmaking, into a “black box” general theory that can be equally applied to all states.

Geography clearly is an important factor shaping world politics, but for the reasons noted above, its role in shaping the international political environment has not received sufficient attention. The study of geopolitics is a vital “niche field,” and it is to be hoped that classical geopolitical thought will enjoy an increased influence on the study of international relations, particularly on the ongoing development of Realist theory. Only classical geopoliticians combine the core assumptions of *Realpolitik* with an abiding interest in how geography impacts world politics. Thus, they have access to an enormously rich vein of thought literally ranging over millennia – figures ranging from Thucydides to Herman Kahn all have strategic insights that a classical geopolitician can apply to his or her analysis.

The enduring relevance of geography

As the US military demonstrated by operating very successfully even in so distant and inhospitable a place as Afghanistan, geography today does not offer a reliable protective barrier to any state fighting a first-rate opponent. Those who believe that geography is becoming less meaningful may cite this fact as power-

ful evidence for their argument. There are, however, several facts that should be considered when assessing the defensive value of favorable geography.

Even geography that is enormously favorable to defense has never guaranteed success against powerful foes; the conquest of Peru, for example, was effected at very little cost to Spain. (Conversely, thirteenth century Muscovy was located in a very vulnerable location, but took advantage of its position and built one of the largest empires in world history.) Geographical considerations most often are critical in closely matched strategic contests, or in cases where the more powerful polity might be convinced that victory only would be attainable at a prohibitive cost. In the latter case, a less powerful state on the defensive may be able to leverage advantageous geography to its advantage and thus compensate for its disadvantage in overall military power.

The most precipitous decline in geography's defensive utility actually did not occur recently, but happened with the development of long-range bombers, nuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles. Even before the completion of the Manhattan Project, the United States and Britain already had developed the ability to inflict very substantial damage on the Axis powers *despite not having control of the ground*, a critical change from previous military experience, when gravely damaging an enemy's homeland required armed men on the ground who enjoyed setting fires. With the development of air-delivered nuclear weapons, it became possible to inflict truly devastating damage on a foe without a single soldier's foot touching enemy soil, and by the mid-1950s, if not earlier, the United States possessed the ability to inflict state-shattering damage on its Soviet counterpart. Ultimately, the deployment of intercontinental ballistic missiles in great numbers allowed their wielders not only to overcome geography, but to compress time further – while it took six years to conduct World War II, the enormous superpower ICBM arsenals made it possible to conduct an even more devastating conflict in an afternoon.

It should be noted, however, that, even today, geography clearly has not lost all its military importance. While geography might have had little meaningful impact on a US–Soviet central nuclear war, it certainly is not irrelevant to most conventional engagements.³³ Conventional military operations have not yet moved “beyond geography,” and will not do so in the foreseeable future; this embarrassingly obvious fact sometimes is lost in current discussions of the RMA.³⁴ It is true that long-range conventional strikes with bombers and cruise missiles now are more accurate and effective than ever before, and it is probable that developments in computer technology mean that sophisticated “cyber-campaigns” will become an important feature of future wars. Nonetheless, soldiers still slog through mud, ships still cross oceans, and severe storms still prevent aircraft from flying.

A twenty-first century geopolitics

In recent years there has been increasing discussion of broad technological trends that many observers believe will change international politics, and human

society in general, fundamentally. Technology indeed is advancing rapidly; in the last several decades there have been parallel and overlapping telecommunications, computer, and transportation revolutions, any one of which would be a matter of great import for human civilization. These revolutions (along with their attendant military revolution) do not, however, render traditional geopolitics irrelevant – space, and the question of who controls it, remains central to international affairs.

The majority of the earth itself is not organized into states. The oceans (other than territorial waters), the Arctic, and the Antarctic are in this sense unorganized; they essentially are considered the common property of humanity. However, only a tiny number of humans live outside of states at any given time and groups of people live in defined territorial entities and are classified as citizens of a state regardless of whether they feel any emotional connection to that political unit. This, of course, does not mean that every state is represented by a functioning government capable of effectively administering all of its territory. “Failed states” are nothing more than legal fictions, and even many “real” states are unable to control all of their territory. There is, for instance, a functioning government of Columbia, but it does not command those parts of the country that are under the control of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) guerrilla group. The organization of world politics is not so simple that one can look at a map and find precisely how the international political system is organized, even if world politics cannot be understood without reference to geography.

Many geopoliticians have stressed the importance of economic factors to state power, particularly addressing the importance of geography to economic development.³⁵ Factors such as natural resources, access to the ocean, position along land trade routes, and agricultural potential are all important to a state’s economic development. Relatedly, geopoliticians also have considered how geography impacts population, while the latter factor of course is also relevant to economic development. Additionally, to a great extent geography determines which cultural influences a society will be exposed to, although this is admittedly less true today, as near-instantaneous audio-visual communications allow individuals in free (and even partially free) societies to enjoy access to eclectic cultural influences.

Given that these interrelated factors are all relevant to the study of international politics, it is clear that geopolitics must address far more than physical geography alone. Although critics allege that geopoliticians attempt to use geography deterministically to discover simple immutable truths, a useful geopolitics must seek to uncover the *connections* between geography and the political culture, society, and economic life of polities and, more broadly, interpret how geography disciplines the interaction among polities. This, in turn, may assist an observer in discerning *general* trends in international politics (although a degree of humility is always in order when addressing the future, as unanticipated factors can have an enormous impact on unfolding history) and discussing the developing security environment.³⁶

Nonetheless, physical geography continues to play a critical role in international, including great power, politics, and recent examples of this fact abound. For instance, geography was central to the long American struggle with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime.³⁷ Regardless of whether one is considering the politics of European unification, the world market price for crude oil, or the question of whether Beijing can claim primacy in the South China Sea, physical geography is a critical part of the discussion.

There is, however, much more to geopolitics than just physical geography. One of the most important factors influencing twenty-first century geopolitics is human geography – the distribution of peoples over the earth, the languages they speak, how they identify themselves ethnically and religiously, and so forth. Even if one does not accept Samuel Huntington's contention that a "clash of civilizations" is unfolding, the human aspect of geography is surely not a factor of diminishing importance. A useful geopolitics for the twenty-first century, far from being geographically deterministic, must be built on the understanding that individuals are independent historical actors. Political interaction takes place in a geographical context, but leaders are not automatons; geographical realities limit the options available to policymakers, but do not render socio-cultural and other factors irrelevant.

To remain a useful tool, geopolitics must continue to assess the influence of technology on world politics. Geopolitical theory has never been blind to the significance of technology, and several great Anglo-American geopolitical theorists have paid close attention to the interaction of geographical and technological factors. Most notably, Mackinder's own ideas were explicitly connected to technology³⁸ – he believed that breakthroughs in naval technology had created the conditions in which Western European sea powers might thrive, and feared that rail lines might enable a land power that controlled the Eurasian Heartland to grow so strong that it could threaten gravely the political fortunes of the European sea powers.³⁹ Given the extraordinarily rapid rate at which technological development has occurred in recent years, the need to consider the impact of technology on international political interactions is obvious. Indeed, this work argues that the world is presently in the midst of the most significant geopolitical shift in roughly 500 years – a movement from the Columbian Epoch of geographical exploration and European dominance to a Post-Columbian Epoch in which the center of political gravity will be in Eastern Eurasia and massive technological change dramatically alters both the great power system and human society more broadly.

The ongoing development of various information, biotechnological, robotic, and other technologies has potentially enormous implications for world politics. While it is impossible to predict precisely how these and other technologies will mature in coming decades, continuing rapid technological development appears certain. In the past, technological breakthroughs repeatedly have served to advance the interests of some powers and damage the prospects of others – indeed, the very concept of technological (as opposed to doctrinal) military revolutions implies that some polities are able to leverage technology to their advantage in warfare, a zero-sum endeavor. As in the past, one may expect that

powers capable of effectively harnessing one or more key technologies will enjoy critical advantages over less-adaptable rivals.

The Post-Columbian Epoch

Although any attempt to date the beginning or end of a historical Epoch is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, the death of the Soviet Union provides as good a marker for the end of the Columbian Epoch as the voyage of Columbus does for its beginning. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Heartland superpower, new possibilities in world politics have emerged. Most importantly, the Cold War standoff in Europe is no longer the central struggle in great power politics, and this change, along with the related collapse of the Soviet state (an unusually powerful and dangerous Heartland tenant), marked the closing of the Columbian Epoch.

The two world wars of the twentieth century served as the catalyst for a dramatic shift in great power politics: Russia/the Soviet Union, a late developer among the European powers and, at least arguably, not Western,⁴⁰ and the United States, a geographically non-European but culturally Western polity, emerged as superpowers that dwarfed countries such as France and Britain that, only a short time earlier, had been regarded as first-rate powers. Thus, the Cold War was the “deathbed scene” for the old Europe-based great power system – Western and Central Europe remained the primary geographical locale for great power competition, but the countries actually located there were no longer the primary movers in world politics. This final period lasted for a bit under fifty years (c.1945–1991), meaning that it constituted a bit less than a tenth of the entire Columbian Epoch (c.1492–1991). Although Europe certainly will not become irrelevant to international politics – indeed, in all likelihood a unified Europe will be one of the world’s most influential polities – it no longer will be the international political center of gravity.

In the years since 1991, history has moved remarkably quickly and, for reasons discussed throughout this work, it likely will further accelerate. The current age will be particularly remarkable for two, previously noted, reasons: the emergence of Eastern Eurasia as the central arena of world politics and ongoing rapid advances in a broad variety of technological fields, including robotics, biotechnology, genetics, computer science, and nanotechnology.

At least for the next several decades – one would not presume to guess the structure of the international system a century from now – this Post-Columbian Epoch will continue to have many of the characteristics of the preceding age: great power politics will be organized in a recognizably Westphalian fashion, with states as the most critical actors in the international system, although the actual roster of great powers will be different than it was in the twentieth century. Describing the general character of the Post-Columbian Epoch is the main purpose of this work. However, aside from the shift in the center of world political competition from the western to the eastern portions of Eurasia, the key characteristic of the successor to the Post-Columbian Epoch is its unpredictabil-

ity – an attribute that will, for reasons that are discussed subsequently, become progressively more prominent with time. Technological development will continue to encourage rapid economic and social change, and all of these will impact the struggle for great power supremacy.

At least since the development of the first agricultural societies, technological change has been intimately connected to political history, and, just as in many past instances, the ability of polities to adjust to technological change will have an enormous influence on their international status. Unlike in earlier periods, however, the sheer weight of looming technological advances mean that this process of technological adaptation will require *extremely* nimble adaptation on the part of societies striving to maintain and enhance their international political status; in comparison to the ongoing technological revolution, the Industrial Revolution was a glacial process. Examples of this fact are already myriad; one need only consider how deeply desktop computers have penetrated the American workplace in the last two decades, a much shorter period than the average worker's career. Subsequent chapters will investigate this revolutionary environment in greater detail and explore how rapid technological change will create an environment favorable to massive political change whose ultimate results will be highly unpredictable.

Conclusion: capturing the new Epoch

For the reasons described above, it is the contention of this work that the international system has already moved beyond the Columbian age into a Post-Columbian Epoch. In this new era, which began *c.* 1991, the arena of decision in great power politics will move away from Europe, where it was located for approximately half a millennium, to Eastern Eurasia. However, the work of the eminent classical geopoliticians still provides a template that is useful in explaining this momentous shift; they have gifted us with tools that can be applied to aid in understanding how geography, in all its forms, shapes international political discourse even as we enter a new geopolitical era.

Attempting to make very precise predications about the mid- to long-term future would be folly. From the perspective of 2050 most predictions made today will appear as silly as the mid-twentieth-century claims that within a few decades Americans would commute to work in flying automobiles – thoughtful geopolitical analysis can assist policymakers in preparing for the future, but the geopolitical toolbox does not include a crystal ball. Yet regardless of what unforeseeable events occur in the future, humans will continue to occupy physical space and have needs that can only be met by interacting with geography. Food must be grown, energy harnessed, goods manufactured, and all these things must be transported to their ultimate consumer, sometimes passing through a large variety of middlemen in several countries along the way. So long as humans exist, the physical world will continue to be relevant to them and will shape the development of their polities.⁴¹ Moreover, so long as human nature remains unchanged,⁴² polities will continue to strive for dominance. Over the next several decades, everything in international politics will change, yet everything will remain the same.