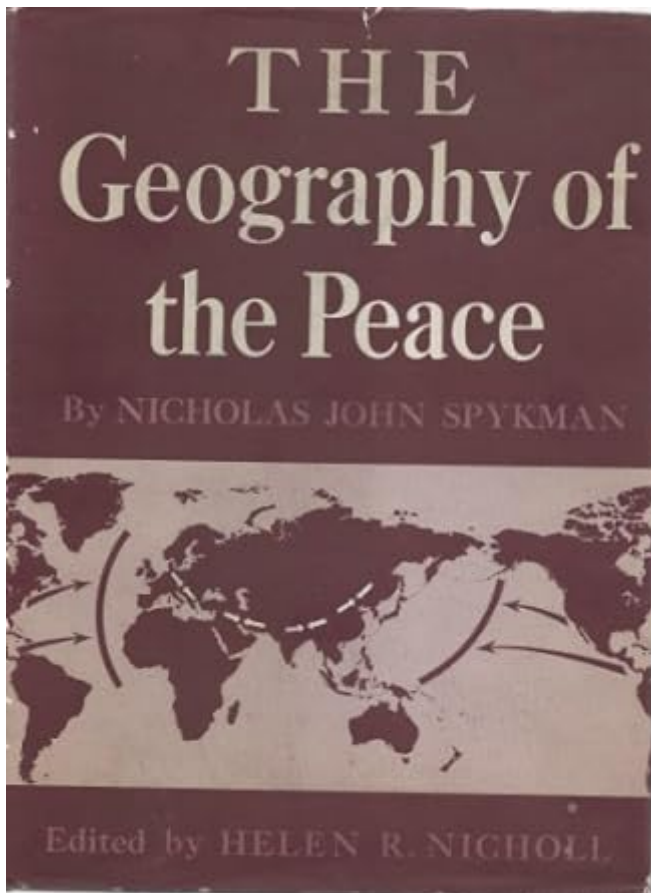




The Geography of the Peace at Eighty

May 5, 2024



The Geography of the Peace
By Nicholas John Spykman.
Harcourt, Brace and Company,
1944.

By **Francis P. Sempa**.

As the United States pours more resources into the Ukraine War and the conflicts in the Levant, our policymakers could do worse than reflect on a book written 80 years ago. Under the auspices of Yale University's Institute of International Studies, the

lectures of Professor Nicholas Spykman, edited by his research assistant Helen Nicholl, appeared in **book** form under the title *The Geography of the Peace* in 1944. Published as the Second World War was entering its final year, Spykman's book was meant to educate American policymakers and citizens on the permanent geopolitical factors that should guide U.S. foreign policy into the future. Some of Spykman's ideas resonate in 2024.

Spykman, whose earlier book *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942) had persuasively countered the idea of a Western Hemispheric defense for the United States, recorded his lectures and used illustrations (mostly maps) to help sketch his geopolitical worldview. The timing of *The Geography of the Peace*'s release (it was published posthumously after Spykman's death at age 49 in 1943) was propitious. The tide of the war had shifted to the Allies' favor. A year earlier, Britain's Halford Mackinder had written his **views** on the geopolitics of the postwar world in "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" in *Foreign Affairs*. Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, originally written in 1919, had been **reissued** in 1942. The leaders of the "Big Three" (Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill) would soon be meeting to diplomatically establish the postwar structure of power that their armies, navies, and air forces had made possible. Spykman's writings were known to some of FDR's advisers. Roosevelt's top wartime geographer Isaiah Bowman once **remarked** that "Every government official responsible for policy should read [Spykman] once a year for the next twenty years."

Spykman began *The Geography of the Peace* noting the "tendency, especially among certain liberals and many who call themselves idealists, to believe that the subject of power in the international world should not be spoken of except in terms of moral disapproval. They consider that studies concerning the organization of peace and security should deal only with the ideals of our democratic civilization and visions of a better world order in which power will play no part." (Apparently, liberals and idealists have not changed in 80 years.) "Western democracies," he continued, ". . . owe their existence and preservation to the effective use of power." And foreshadowing Donald Trump, Spykman wrote that "the final responsibility for the security of each individual state rests upon itself alone." Spykman dismissed the notion of global governance so popular among today's global elites.

Like George Washington in his Farewell Address, Spykman appreciated the need for temporary collective security arrangements that support U.S. national

security interests. Those security arrangements were affected by geography, but also other factors including relative population, economics, industrial production, the form of government, the perspectives of statesmen and leaders, and the ideals and values of the people. In the 19th century, Spykman wrote, the United States was protected from the “power struggles of the Old World” by British sea power. During and after World War II, it was essential for America to develop its sea power to maintain our safety and protect our security interests.

Spykman presented a map that showed how the United States (and the entire Western Hemisphere) was encircled by the joint continent of Eurasia-Africa. Mackinder made this same point in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* where he called the Eurasian-African landmass the “World-Island.” Spykman wrote that the great danger during the Second World War was that Germany and Japan could have coordinated their foreign and military policies to bring about a situation where the U.S. “might have had to face the unified power of the whole Eurasian land mass” which would have made it “impossible for us to preserve our independence and security.” U.S. foreign policy, Spykman wrote, must see to it that “no nation or alliance of nations is allowed to emerge as a dominating power in either of the two regions of the Old World from which our security could be threatened”—East Asia and Western Europe. U.S. security, therefore, depends upon the existence of geopolitical pluralism in both of those regions.

The key to American security, according to Spykman, was sea power. “It is sea power,” he wrote, “which has made it possible to conceive of the Eurasian Continent as a unit and it is sea power which governs the relationships between the Old and the New Worlds.” Today, we can add air power, space power, and cyber power to that equation. Spykman praised the works of both Alfred Thayer Mahan and Mackinder, though he differed with Mackinder on the importance of certain key regions of the globe. Mackinder believed that the inner core region of Eurasia that he called the “Heartland” was the key to global politics, while Spykman viewed the regions in East Asia,

South Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe—a region he called the “Rimland”—as controlling the “destinies of the world.”

Spykman predicted the rise of India and China in the Indo-Pacific region. “India,” he explained, “. . . will be the dominant power on the Indian Ocean shore,” while “the dominant power in the Far East will undoubtedly be China.” With Nixonian brilliance, Spykman contended that Russia would be needed to counterbalance China, while the Western powers would need to rely on “island bases for their power” in East Asia. Spykman called the East Asian littoral that included the East China and South China Seas the “Asiatic Mediterranean.” It is almost as if he had a crystal ball to gaze into the 21st century.

The current conflicts in Ukraine and the Levant are geopolitical distractions for the United States, yet the Biden administration and many Republican “hawks” are escalating those conflicts in both regions even as war clouds gather in the western Pacific. The “geography of the peace” for 2024 instructs the United States to buttress its naval power in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the East Asian littoral that Spykman called the Asiatic Mediterranean. It instructs U.S. policymakers to maintain and expand bases on the island chains that can serve to contain China. It instructs U.S. leaders to exploit any political divisions between China and Russia. It instructs U.S. statesmen to forge a stronger partnership with India. The end of the Cold War maintained and strengthened the geopolitical pluralism of Europe. The “geography of the peace” for 2024 requires us to exercise restraint in Europe and the Middle East while focusing our deterrent resources and strategies on the Indo-Pacific.

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