

RealClear Defense

A portrait of Robert D. Kaplan, a man with glasses and a dark suit, looking slightly to the left. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Our Modern-Day Mackinder

By Francis P. Sempa  
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Robert D. Kaplan

The great British geographer and statesman Sir Halford Mackinder wrote compelling **books** and **essays** in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that urged his countrymen to adjust their democratic ideals to the realities of our earthly home. Those realities included geography, history, and human nature. Mackinder's works are where all current global geopolitical analyses should begin. He grasped timeless geopolitical realities...

are where all current global geopolitical analyses should begin. He grasped timeless geopolitical realities--the centrality of Eurasia, the sea power-land power dichotomy, relative population distribution, and the importance of economic and social momentum (the "going concern") --that should still guide our statesmen and strategists in today's world. Contemporary America is fortunate to have its own modern-day Mackinder: Robert D. Kaplan.

Robert Kaplan, a former Pentagon consultant and the current Robert Strausz-Hupe Chair in Geopolitics at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, is the prolific author of 22 books, but the essence of his geopolitical thought are found in seven of them: *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2011), *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (2012), *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (2014), *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century* (2018), *Adriatic: A Concert of Civilizations at the End of the Modern Age* (2022), *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power* (2023), and his latest tome, *The Loom of Time: Between Empire and Anarchy from the Mediterranean to China* (2023).

References to Mackinder and other classical geopolitical thinkers such as Nicholas Spykman and Alfred Thayer Mahan are ubiquitous in these books. Kaplan understands that he stands on the shoulders of giants. But not only the giants of geopolitical thought. In *The Tragic Mind*, Kaplan reaches back to the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare, the novelists Joseph Conrad and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the chronicler of the rise and fall of civilizations Arnold J. Toynbee to gain insight into human nature and the behavior of states and their leaders throughout history. Those writers teach us about human ambition and frailties, the irrational aspects of human actions, the sin of pride and the dangers of unbounded hubris. They allow us to see tragedy and human realities behind the illusion of progress.

Mackinder cautioned the idealists of his time that they ignored geographical and human realities at their peril. In "The Geographical Pivot of History" (1904), Mackinder showed how modern Europe was shaped by invasions and migrations from inner Asia, and remarkably foreshadowed geopolitical trends that resulted in the two world wars and Cold War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kaplan in a [report](#) originally written for the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, updated Mackinder's analysis to the 21<sup>st</sup> century rivalry between the United States and China. Kaplan wrote that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and growing naval power threatened to make Mackinder's concept of the "World-Island" (a politically dominated Eurasian-African landmass) a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. Mackinder famously warned in 1919: "Who rules the World-Island commands the world." Kaplan sees Mackinderesque geopolitical design in China's actions in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, its naval build-up, its strategic partnership with Russia, its growing nuclear arsenal, and its growing economic and political influence in Central Asia and Africa. "Geography," wrote Kaplan in *The Revenge of Geography*, "is the preface to the very track of human events." Mackinder noted that China's geography--continental sized landmass with significant oceanic frontage--and vast human and natural resources made it a potential seat of a world empire.

In *The Loom of Time*, Kaplan makes his strongest case yet for a realist approach to foreign policy based on history, geography, and an understanding of human nature. It is an approach that values "order" over "chaos" and "anarchy." (Kaplan even has a few good things to say about the "order" imposed by empires of the past). It is an approach that considers the importance of culture, ethnicity, nationalism, and religion in formulating an effective foreign policy that advances *America's* interests. And while Kaplan is no fan of former President Donald Trump, he very much favors an "America-first" foreign policy in the tradition of George Washington and John Quincy Adams. He derides the liberal internationalist and neoconservative vision that favors crusades in support of democracy and apologizes for his own abandonment of realism to support the futile and disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mackinder was a professional geographer who traveled to the many lands that he wrote about. He served as Britain's envoy to a faction of the "White" forces during the Russian Civil War after World War I. He presciently warned his countrymen then about the threat Bolshevism would pose to the global order should they emerge victorious in Russia. He wrote many books about the geography, history, and peoples of other countries. His foreign policy goal, as he wrote in his last major [essay](#) "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" (1943), was "A balanced globe of human beings. And happy, because balanced and thus free."

and this too.

Robert Kaplan, like Mackinder, travels to the lands that he writes about, and sees a global balance of power as the surest guarantee of American liberty in an anarchic world of nation-states. Kaplan has enlisted geography, history, and an understanding of human nature as aids to effective statecraft. He is our modern-day Mackinder.

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