

From the Heartland to the Island of the Americas

An Essay on Classical Geopolitical Theories and the Reconfiguration of Global Power in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper examines a hypothetical scenario in which the United States, under Trump's leadership, withdraws from NATO and reduces its support for Europe, thereby enabling a Russian conquest of Ukraine and the subsequent expansion of Moscow's influence over Eurasia, while the US consolidates its dominance over South America. Drawing on classical geopolitical theories—specifically those of Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Rudolf Kjellén, and Friedrich Ratzel—the study analyzes how these frameworks can elucidate the evolving power dynamics and territorial ambitions in a reconfigured global order. The discussion highlights Mackinder's notion of the Eurasian Heartland and its strategic importance, Mahan's emphasis on maritime power and control of strategic routes, Kjellén's view of the state as an expanding organism, and Ratzel's concept of Lebensraum as a justification for territorial expansion. The paper also explores contemporary developments, such as the US–Ukraine economic agreement and Trump's overt territorial ambitions involving Greenland and Canada, in light of these theories. By juxtaposing traditional geopolitical concepts with current international relations, the study aims to shed light on the potential implications of such shifts for regional stability, global security, and the balance of power, particularly in relation to emerging neocolonial practices in Latin America.

Introduction

In recent years, the geopolitical dynamics involving the United States, Russia, and Ukraine have sparked analyses from different theoretical perspectives. This paper examines recent events – presupposing a scenario in which Donald Trump withdraws the US from NATO and reduces its support for Europe, allowing a Russian conquest of Ukraine and the expansion of Moscow's influence over Eurasia, while the US consolidates its dominance over South America – in light of

classical geopolitical theories. The ideas of Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Rudolf Kjellén, and Friedrich Ratzel are used as reference points. The proposal is to impartially evaluate how each theory can elucidate the developments of this hypothetical scenario, relating Russian territorial expansion in Eurasia to the strategic retreat of the US to the Western Hemisphere.

Initially, we will outline Mackinder's conception of the Heartland (the central Eurasian territory) and the crucial role of Eastern Europe and Ukraine in the quest for global dominance. Next, we will discuss Mahan's ideas regarding maritime power and the control of strategic routes, considering the impacts on the naval power balance among the US, Russia, and other maritime powers such as the United Kingdom and Japan. Subsequently, we will examine Kjellén's organic theory of the state, interpreting the Russian expansionist strategy as a reflection of a state organism in search of vital space. In the same vein, Ratzel's concept of "Lebensraum" will be explored, along with how Russia could justify territorial expansion based on resources and territory. Finally, the paper connects these theories to the current political context, analyzing the direct negotiations between Washington and Moscow (overlooking Ukraine and Europe), the US policy toward authoritarian regimes in Latin America, and the notion of a hemispheric division of power – the "Island of the Americas" under North American hegemony versus an Eurasia dominated by Russia. Lastly, it considers the possibility that such a geopolitical arrangement may foster the strengthening of authoritarian governments globally, rather than containing them, thus altering the paradigms of the liberal world order.

The Heartland of Mackinder: Ukraine, Eurasia, and Global Dominance

Halford J. Mackinder, a British geographer and pioneer of geopolitics, proposed the celebrated Heartland Theory in the early twentieth century. Mackinder divided the world into geostrategic zones and identified the Heartland—the central continental mass of Eurasia—as the "geographical pivot of history" [5]. His most famous maxim encapsulates this vision: "who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; who rules the World Island commands the world" [5]. Eastern Europe and, in particular, the region of present-day Ukraine, play a key role in this formula. This is because, for Mackinder, Eastern Europe functions as a gateway to the Heartland, providing access to resources and a strategic position for the projection of continental power [5].

Applying this theory to our scenario, the conquest of Ukraine and Eastern European countries by Russia would have profound geopolitical implications. From a Mackinderian point of view, such a conquest would enormously strengthen Russia's position in the Heartland by adding manpower (population) and Ukraine's industrial and agricultural resources to its power base [5]. In fact, Mackinder argued that controlling the Heartland conferred formidable geostrategic advantages—a vast terrestrial "natural fortress" protected from naval invasions and rich in resources such as wheat, minerals, and fuels [5]. Thus, if Moscow were to incorporate Ukraine (renowned for its fertile soil and grain production, as well as its mineral reserves) and extend its

influence over Eastern Europe, Russia would consolidate the Heartland under its direct control. In this context, the absence of the USA (withdrawn from NATO and less engaged in Europe) would remove an important obstacle to Russian predominance in the region.

With central and eastern Eurasia under Russian influence, it would be possible to move toward the realization of the geopolitical nightmare described by Mackinder for Western maritime powers: a hegemonic continental power capable of projecting power to both Europe and Asia. Mackinder himself warned that if a Heartland power gained additional access to an oceanic coastline—in other words, if it combined land power with a significant maritime front—it would constitute a “danger” to global freedom [5]. In the scenario considered, besides advancing into Eastern Europe, Russia would already possess strategic maritime outlets (for example, in the Black Sea, via Crimea, and in the Baltic, via Kaliningrad or the Baltic States if influenced). Thus, the control of Ukraine would reinforce Russia’s position in the Black Sea and facilitate projection into the Eastern Mediterranean, expanding its oceanic front. From a Mackinderian perspective, this could potentially transform Russia into the dominant power of the “World Island” (the combined mass of Europe, Asia, and Africa), thereby unbalancing the global geopolitical order [5].

It is worth noting that, historically, Mackinder’s doctrine influenced containment strategies: both in the interwar period and during the Cold War, efforts were made to prevent a single power from controlling the Heartland and Eastern Europe. NATO, for example, can be seen as an instrument to prevent Soviet/Russian advances in Europe, in line with Mackinder’s imperative to “contain the Heartland.” Thus, if the USA were to abandon that role—by leaving NATO and tacitly accepting the Russian sphere of influence in Eurasia—we would be witnessing an inversion of the principles that have guided Western policy for decades. In short, under Mackinder’s theory, the Russian conquest of Ukraine and beyond would represent the key for Russia to command the Heartland and, potentially, challenge global hegemony, especially in a scenario where the USA self-restricts to the Western Hemisphere.

The Maritime Power of Mahan and the Naval Balance between West and East

While Mackinder emphasized continental land power, Alfred Thayer Mahan, a nineteenth-century American naval strategist, highlighted the crucial role of maritime power in global dominance. In his work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), Mahan studied the example of the British Empire and concluded that control of the seas paved the way for British supremacy as a world power [10]. He argued that a strong navy and the control of strategic maritime routes were decisive factors for projecting military, political, and economic power. His doctrine can be summarized in the following points: (1) the United States should aspire to be a world power; (2) control of the seas is necessary to achieve that status; (3) such control is obtained through a powerful fleet of warships [17]. In other words, for Mahan, whoever

dominates the maritime routes and possesses naval superiority will be in a position to influence global destinies, ensuring trade, supplies, and the rapid movement of military forces.

In the proposed scenario, in which the USA withdraws militarily from Europe and possibly from the Eurasian stage, Mahan's ideas raise questions about the distribution of maritime power and its effects. Traditionally, the US Navy operates globally, ensuring freedom of navigation and deterring challenges in major seas (Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, etc.). A withdrawal of the USA from NATO could also signal a reduction in its naval presence in the Northeast Atlantic, the Mediterranean Sea, and other areas close to Eurasia. In such a case, who would fill this naval vacuum? Russia, although primarily a land power, has been attempting to modernize its navy and has specific interests—for example, consolidating its dominance in the Black Sea and maintaining a presence in the Mediterranean (with a naval base in Tartus, Syria). The United Kingdom, a historic European maritime power, would remain aligned with the USA but, without American military support in Europe, might potentially be overwhelmed trying to contain an increasingly assertive Russian navy in European waters on its own. Japan, another significant maritime actor allied with the USA, is concerned with the naval balance in the Pacific; without full American engagement, Tokyo might be compelled to expand its own naval power to contain both Russia in the Far East (which maintains a fleet in the Pacific) and, especially, the growing Chinese navy.

According to Mahan's thinking, strategic maritime routes and choke points (crucial straits and channels) become contested prizes in this power game. With the USA focusing on the Americas, one could imagine Washington reinforcing control over the Panama Canal and Caribbean routes—reviving an “American Gulf” policy in the Western Atlantic and Eastern Pacific. In fact, indications of this orientation emerge in statements attributed to Trump, who once suggested reclaiming direct control over Panama, transforming Canada into a North American state, and even “annexing” Greenland due to its Arctic geopolitical importance [18]. These aspirations reflect a quest to secure advantageous maritime positions near the American continent.

Conversely, in the absence of American presence in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, Russia would have free rein for regional maritime projection. This could include anything from the unrestricted use of the Black Sea (after dominating Ukraine, thereby ensuring full access to Crimea and Ukrainian ports) to greater influence in the Eastern Mediterranean via Syria and partnerships with countries such as Iran or Egypt. The Baltic Sea would also become an area of expanded Russian interest, pressuring coastal countries and perhaps reducing NATO's traditional local naval supremacy. However, it is worth noting that even with these regional expansions, Russia lacks a blue-water navy comparable to that of the USA; thus, its initial global maritime impact would be limited without alliances.

An important aspect of Mahan's theories is that naval power serves as a counterbalance to the land power of the Heartland. Therefore, even if Russia were to dominate the Eurasian continental mass, the continued presence of American naval might on the oceans could prevent complete global domination by Moscow. However, if the USA voluntarily restricts its naval reach to the Americas, it would forgo influencing the power balance in the seas adjacent to Eurasia.

Consequently, the balance of maritime power would tend to shift in favor of regional Eurasian actors. The United Kingdom and Japan, traditional allies of the USA, could intensify their naval capabilities to defend regional interests—the United Kingdom safeguarding the North Atlantic and the North Sea, and Japan patrolling the Northwest Pacific—but both would face budgetary and structural limitations in fully compensating for the absence of the American superpower. Consequently, Mahan’s vision suggests that the withdrawal of the USA from the extra-regional scene would weaken the liberal maritime regime, possibly opening space for revisionist powers to contest routes that were previously secured (for example, Russia and China encountering less opposition on the routes of the Arctic and the Indo-Pacific, respectively). In summary, naval hegemony would fragment, and control of strategic seas would become contested, reconfiguring the relative influence of the USA, Russia, and maritime allies such as the United Kingdom and Japan.

Kjellén and the State as a Living Organism: Russian Expansion as an Organic Necessity

Another useful theoretical lens to interpret Russian geopolitical posture is that of Rudolf Kjellén, a Swedish political scientist of the early twentieth century who conceived the State as a living organism. Kjellén, who even coined the term “geopolitics,” was influenced by Friedrich Ratzel’s ideas and by social Darwinism, arguing that States are born, grow, and decline analogously to living beings [13]. In his work *Staten som livsform* (The State as a Form of Life, 1916), he maintained that States possess an organic dimension in addition to the legal one and that “just as any form of life, States must expand or die” [14]. This expansion would not be motivated merely by aggressive conquest but seen as a necessary growth for the self-preservation of the state organism [14]. In complement, Kjellén echoed Ratzel’s “law of expanding spaces” by asserting that large States expand at the expense of smaller ones, with it being only a matter of time before the great realms fill the available spaces [14]. That is, from the organic perspective, vigorous States tend to incorporate smaller neighboring territories, consolidating territorially much like an organism absorbing nutrients.

Applying this theory to the strategy of contemporary Russia, we can interpret Moscow’s actions—including the invasion of Ukraine and the ambition to restore its sphere of influence in Eurasia—as the expression of an organic drive for expansion. For a strategist influenced by this school, Russia (viewed as a state organism with a long imperial history) needs to expand its territory and influence to ensure its survival and security. The loss of control over spaces that once were part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union (such as Ukraine itself, the Caucasus, or Central Asia) may be perceived by Russian elites as an atrophy of the state organism, rendering it vulnerable. Thus, the reincorporation of these territories—whether directly (annexation) or indirectly (political vassalage)—would equate to restoring lost members or strengthening vital organs of the state body. In fact, official Russian arguments often portray Ukraine as an intrinsic part of “Russian historicity,” denying it a fully separate identity—a narrative that aligns with the idea that Russian expansion in that region is natural and necessary

for the Russian State (seen as encompassing also Russian speakers beyond its current borders).

Kjellén would thus provide a theoretical justification for Russian territorial expansion as an organic phenomenon. As a great power, Russia would inevitably seek to expand at the expense of smaller neighbors (Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic States, etc.), as dictated by the tendency of “great spaces to organize” to the detriment of the small [14]. This view can be identified in contemporary Russian doctrines that value spheres of influence and the notion that neighboring countries must gravitate around Moscow in order for the natural order to be maintained. The very idea of “Eurasia” united under Russian leadership (advocated by modern Russian thinkers) echoes this organic conception of vital space and expansion as a sign of the State’s vitality.

However, Kjellén’s theory also warns of the phenomenon of “imperial overstretch,” should a State exceed its internal cohesion limits by expanding excessively [14]. He recognized that extending borders too far could increase friction and vulnerabilities, making it difficult to maintain cohesion—a very large organism may lack functional integration. In the Russian context, this suggests that although expansion is seen as necessary, there are risks if Russia tries to encompass more than it can govern effectively. Conquering Ukraine and subjugating Eastern Europe, for example, could economically and militarily overburden the Russian State, especially if it faced resistance or had to manage hostile populations. However, in the hypothetical scenario we adopt (isolated USA and a weakened Europe), Russia might calculate that the organic benefits of expansion (territory, resources, strategic depth) would outweigh the costs, since external interference would be limited. Thus, through Kjellén’s lens, expansionist Russia behaves as an organism following its instinct for survival and growth, absorbing weaker neighbors; yet such a process is not devoid of challenges, requiring that the “organism Russia” manages to assimilate these new spaces without collapsing under its own weight.

Ratzel and Lebensraum: Resources, Territory, and the Justification for Expansion

Parallel to Kjellén’s organic view, Friedrich Ratzel’s theory offers another conceptual basis for understanding Russian expansion: the concept of Lebensraum (vital space). Ratzel, a German geographer of the late nineteenth century, proposed that the survival and development of a people or nation depended critically on the available physical space and resources. Influenced by Darwinist ideas, he applied the notion of “survival of the fittest” to nations, arguing that human societies need to conquer territory and resources to prosper, and that the stronger and fittest civilizations will naturally prevail over the weaker ones [12]. In 1901, Ratzel coined the term Lebensraum to describe this need for “vital space” as a geographical factor in national power [15].

Subsequently, this idea would be adopted—and extremely distorted—by Nazi ideology to justify Germany’s aggressions in Europe. However, the core of Ratzel’s concept is that territorial

expansion is essential for the survival and growth of a State, especially to secure food, raw materials, and space for its population [12].

When examining Russia's stance under this perspective, we can see several narratives that evoke the logic of Lebensraum. Russia is the largest country in the world by area; however, much of its territory is characterized by adverse climates (tundra, taiga) and is relatively sparsely populated in Siberia. On the other hand, adjacent regions such as Ukraine possess highly arable lands (chernozem—black soil), significant Slavic population density, and additional natural resources (coal in the Donbass, for example). An implicit justification for Russian expansion could be the search for supplementary resources and fertile lands to secure its self-sufficiency and power—exactly as Ratzel described that vigorous nations do. Historical records show that Ratzel emphasized agrarian primacy: he believed that new territories should be colonized by farmers, providing the food base for the nation [12]. Ukraine, historically called the “breadbasket of Europe,” fits perfectly into this vision of conquest for sustenance and agricultural wealth.

Furthermore, Ratzel viewed geography as a determinant of the destiny of nations—peoples adapted to certain habitats seek to expand them if they aspire to grow. In contemporary Russian discourse, there is often mention of the need to ensure security and territorial depth in the face of NATO, or to unite brotherly peoples (Russians and Russian speakers) within a single political space. Such arguments can be read as a modern translation of Lebensraum: the idea that the Russian nation, in order to be secure and flourish, must control a larger space, encompassing buffer zones and critical resources. This Russian “vital space” would naturally include Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, given the historical and infrastructural interdependence. Ratzel emphasized that peoples migrated and expanded when their original homeland no longer met their needs or aspirations [12]. Although contemporary Russia does not suffer from demographic pressure (on the contrary, it faces population decline), under the logic of a great power there is indeed a sentiment of geopolitical insufficiency for having lost influence over areas considered strategic. Thus, reconquering these areas would mean recovering the “habitat” necessary for the Russian nation to prosper and feel secure.

It is important to mention that, in Ratzel's and Kjellén's formulations, the pursuit of Lebensraum or organic expansion is not morally qualified—it is treated as a natural process in the politics of power. Thus, on the discursive level, Russia can avoid overly aggressive rhetoric and resort to “natural” justifications: for example, claiming that it needs to occupy Ukraine for defensive purposes (security space) or to reunify peoples (a common cultural and historical space). Beneath these justifications, however, resonates the geopolitical imperative to acquire more territory and resources as a guarantee of national survival, something consonant with Ratzel's theory. In fact, Russian Realpolitik frequently prioritizes the control of energy resources (gas, oil) and transportation routes. Expanding its influence over central Eurasia would also mean controlling oil pipelines, gas lines, and logistical corridors—essential elements of modern Lebensraum understood as access to vital resources and infrastructure.

In summary, by conquering Ukraine and extending its reach into Eurasia, Russia could effectively invoke the concept of Lebensraum: presenting its expansion not as mere imperialism,

but as a necessity to secure indispensable lands and resources for its people and to correct the “injustice” of a vital space diminished by post-Cold War territorial losses. The theories of Ratzel and Kjellén together paint a picture in which Russian expansion emerges almost as a natural law—the great State reclaiming space to ensure its survival and development at the expense of smaller neighbors.

Trump, NATO, and the Threat of American Withdrawal

One of the most alarming changes with Trump's return to power is the tense relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Trump has long criticized allies for not meeting military spending targets, even threatening during his first term to withdraw the US from the alliance if members did not increase their contributions [2]. This threat, initially viewed with skepticism, became concrete after his re-election, leading European allies to seriously consider the possibility of having to defend themselves without American support [1]. In fact, Trump suggested in post-election interviews that the US would only remain in NATO if the allies “paid their bills” – otherwise, he “would seriously consider” leaving [2]. Such statements reinforced the warning that the US might not honor NATO's mutual defense commitment, precisely at a time of continuous Russian threat due to the war in Ukraine [1].

From a theoretical point of view, this posture of American retrenchment evokes the classic tension between maritime power and land power. Alfred Thayer Mahan emphasized that the global power of the US derived largely from its naval superiority and from alliances that ensured control over strategic maritime routes [9]. NATO, since 1949, has served not only to deter Soviet terrestrial advances in Eurasia, but also to secure the US naval presence in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean – a fundamental element according to Mahan. In turn, Halford Mackinder warned that the balance of global power depended on the control of the Eurasian “Heartland” (the central region of Eurasia). The withdrawal or disengagement of the US (a maritime power) from this region could open the way for a continental power (such as Russia) to expand its influence in Eastern Europe, unbalancing the power balance [3]. In other words, by threatening to leave NATO, Trump jeopardizes the principle of containment that prevented Russian dominance over Eastern Europe – something that Mackinder would see as a dangerous shift in global power in favor of the Heartland power.

Adopting an impartial tone, it is observed that European countries have reacted to this new reality with precautionary measures. Strategic reports already calculate the cost of an autonomous European defense: hundreds of thousands of additional soldiers and investments of hundreds of billions of euros would be required if the US ceased to guarantee the security of the continent [1]. European dependence on American military power is significant and, without it, there would be a need for a major reinforcement of European Armed Forces [1]. This mobilization practically reflects the anticipation of a power vacuum left by the US – a scenario in

which Mackinder's theory (on the primacy of the Heartland and the vulnerability of the "external crescent" where Western Europe is located) regains its relevance.

The US–Ukraine Economic Agreement: Strategic Minerals in Exchange for Support?

Another novelty of Trump's second term is the unprecedented and transactional manner in which Washington has been dealing with the war in Ukraine. Instead of emphasizing security guarantees and alliances, the Trump administration proposed a trade agreement with Ukraine focused on the exploitation of strategic minerals, linking American support to a direct economic benefit. According to sources close to the negotiations, the US and Ukraine are about to sign a pact to share the revenues from the exploitation of critical mineral resources on Ukrainian territory [19]. Materials such as titanium, lithium, rare earths, and uranium – vital for high-tech and defense industries – would be at the core of this agreement [6]. According to the known draft, Ukraine would allocate 50% of the profits from new mineral ventures to a fund controlled by the US, which would reinvest part of the resources in the country's own reconstruction [6] [19].

It is noteworthy that the pact does not include explicit security guarantees for Kyiv, despite Ukraine remaining under direct military threat from Russia [19]. Essentially, the Trump administration offers financial support and economic investment in exchange for a share in Ukrainian natural resources, but without formally committing to Ukraine's defense in the event of a renewed Russian offensive [19]. American authorities argue that this economic partnership would already be sufficient to "secure Ukrainian interests," as it would provide the US with its own incentives to desire Ukraine's stability [19]. "What could be better for Ukraine than being in an economic partnership with the United States?" stated Mike Waltz, a US national security advisor, defending the proposal [19].

Analysts, however, assess the agreement in divided terms. For some, it represents a form of economic exploitation at a time of Ukraine's fragility – comparing the demand to share mineral wealth amid war to a scheme of "mafia protection" [19]. Steven Cook, from the Council on Foreign Relations, classified the offer as "extortion," and political scientist Virginia P. Fortna observed that charging resources from an invaded country resembles predatory practices [19]. Joseph Nye adds that it is a short-term gain strategy that could be "disastrous in the long run" for American credibility, reflecting the transactional approach that Trump even adopted with close allies in other contexts [19]. On the other hand, some see a future advantage for Kyiv: journalist Pierre Briançon suggests that at least this agreement aligns American commercial interests with Ukraine's future, which could, in theory, keep the US involved in Ukrainian prosperity in the long term [19]. It is even recalled that President Zelensky himself proposed last year the idea of sharing natural resources with the US to bring the interests of the two countries closer together [19].

From the perspective of geopolitical theories, this agreement illustrates a shift towards economic pragmatism in international relations, approaching concepts proposed by Kjellén. Rudolf Kjellén, who coined the term “geopolitics,” saw the State as a territorial organism that seeks to ensure its survival through self-sufficiency and the control of strategic resources [4]. Trump's demand for a share in Ukrainian resources in order to continue supporting the country reflects a logic of autarky and direct national interest – that is, foreign policy serving primarily to reinforce the economic and material position of the US. This view contrasts with the traditional cooperative approach, but aligns with Kjellén’s idea that powerful States tend to transform international relations into opportunities for their own gain, ensuring access to vital raw materials. Similarly, Friedrich Ratzel argued that States have a “propensity to expand their borders according to their capacities,” seeking vital space (Lebensraum) and resources to sustain their development [11]. The US–Ukraine pact, by conditioning military/economic aid on obtaining tangible advantages (half of the mineral profits), is reminiscent of Ratzel’s perspective: the US, as a rising economic power, expands its economic influence over Ukrainian territory like an organism extending itself to obtain the necessary resources for its well-being. It is, therefore, a form of economic expansionism at the expense of purely ideological commitments or collective security.

Peace Negotiations Excluding Ukraine and the Legitimacy of the Agreement

Another controversial point is the manner in which peace negotiations between Russia and the West have been conducted under Trump's administration. Since taking office, the American president has engaged directly with Moscow in pursuit of a ceasefire, deliberately keeping the Ukrainian government out of the initial discussions [6]. Trump expressed his desire to “leave Zelensky out of the conversation” and also excluded the European Union from any influence in the process [6]. This negotiation strategy—conducted without the presence of the primary interested party, Ukraine—raises serious questions about the legitimacy and sustainability of any resulting agreement.

Historically, peace agreements reached without the direct participation of one of the conflicting parties tend to face problems in implementation and acceptance.

The exclusion of Ukraine in the decision-making phase brings to light the issue of guarantees. As noted, the emerging agreement lacks formal US security guarantees for Ukraine. This implies that, after the agreement is signed, nothing will prevent Russia from launching a new offensive if it deems it convenient, knowing that the US has not committed to defending it militarily. Experts have already warned that a ceasefire without robust protection may only be a pause for Russian rearmament, rendering the conflict “frozen” temporarily and potentially resumed in the near future. The European strategic community has expressed similar concern: without American deterrence, the risk of further Russian aggressions in the region increases considerably [1]. Denmark, for example, has released intelligence reports warning of possible

imminent Russian attacks, prompting neighboring countries to accelerate plans for independent defense [1].

The legitimacy of this asymmetric peace agreement (negotiated without Ukraine fully at the table and under economic coercion) is also questionable from a legal and moral point of view. It violates the principle of self-determination by imposing terms decided by great powers on a sovereign country—a practice reminiscent of dark chapters in diplomacy, such as the Munich Agreement of 1938, when powers determined the fate of Czechoslovakia without its consent. In the current case, Ukraine would end up signing the agreement, but from a position of weakness, raising doubts about how durable such a commitment would be.

From Mackinder's perspective, Ukraine's removal from the battlefield without guarantees essentially means admitting a greater influence of Russia (the Heartland power) over Eastern Europe. This would alter the balance in Eurasia in a potentially lasting way. Furthermore, the fact that great powers negotiate over the heads of a smaller country evokes the imperial logic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when empires decided among themselves the divisions of foreign territories—a behavior that Mackinder saw as likely in a world of a "closed system." With the entire world already occupied by States, Mackinder predicted that powers would begin to compete for influence within this consolidated board, often subjugating smaller states to gain advantage [3]. The US–Russia negotiation regarding Ukraine, without proper Ukrainian representation, exemplifies this type of neo-imperial dynamic in the twenty-first century.

Also noteworthy is the consonance with the ideas of Ratzel and Kjellén: both viewed smaller states as easily relegated to the status of satellites or even "parasitic organisms" in the orbit of larger states. Kjellén spoke of the intrinsic vulnerability of states with little territorial depth or economic dependence, making them susceptible to external pressures [4][20]. Ukraine, weakened by war and dependent on external aid, becomes a concrete example of this theorized vulnerability: it has had to cede strategic resources and accept terms dictated against its will in an attempt to secure its immediate survival. The resulting agreement, therefore, reflects a power imbalance characteristic of the hierarchical international relations described by classical geopolitical theorists.

Implicit Territorial Concessions and Trump's Public Discourse

A central and controversial point in Trump's statements regarding the war in Ukraine is the insinuation of territorial concessions to Russia as part of the conflict's resolution. Publicly, Trump avoided explicitly condemning Russian aggression and even stated that he considered it "unlikely" that Ukraine would be able to retake all the areas occupied by the Russians [16]. In debates and interviews, he suggested that "if I were president, the war would end in 24 hours," implying that he would force an understanding between Kyiv and Moscow that would likely involve ceding some territory in exchange for peace. This position marks a break with the

previous US policy of not recognizing any territorial acquisitions made by force and fuels speculations that a future peace agreement sponsored by Trump would legitimize at least part of Russia's gains since 2014 (Crimea, Donbass, and areas seized during the 2022 invasion).

The actions of his administration corroborate this interpretation. As discussed, the economic agreement focuses on the exploitation of Ukrainian natural resources, many of which are located precisely in regions currently under Russian military control, such as parts of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, Donetsk, Lugansk, and the Azov Sea area [6]. A Ukrainian geologist, Hanna Liventseva, highlighted that “most of these elements (strategic minerals) are found in the south of the Ukrainian Shield, mainly in the Azov region, and most of these territories are currently invaded by Russia” [6]. This means that, to make joint exploitation viable, Russia's de facto control over these areas would have to be recognized—or at least tolerated—in the short term. In other words, the pact indirectly and tacitly accepts Russian territorial gains, as it involves sharing the profits from resources that are not currently accessible to the Kyiv government.

Furthermore, figures close to Trump have made explicit statements regarding the possibility of territorial cession. Mike Waltz, Trump's national security advisor, publicly stated that Zelensky might need to “cede land to Russia” to end the war [8]. This remark—made public in March 2025—confirms that the Trump White House considers it natural for Ukraine to relinquish parts of its territory in favor of an agreement. Such a stance marks a break from the previous Western consensus, which condemned any territorial gains by force. Under Trump, a pragmatic view (in the eyes of his supporters) or a cynical one (according to his critics) seems to prevail: sacrificing principles of territorial integrity to quickly end hostilities and secure immediate economic benefits.

In theoretical terms, this inclination to validate territorial gains by force recalls the concept of Realpolitik and the geopolitical Darwinism that influenced thinkers such as Ratzel. In Ratzel's organic conception, expanding states naturally absorb neighboring territories when they are strong enough to do so, while declining states lose territory—a process almost biological in the selection of the fittest [11]. The Trump administration's acceptance that Ukraine should “give something” to Moscow to seal peace reflects a normalization of this geopolitical selection process: it recognizes the aggressor (Russia) as having the “right” to retain conquered lands, because that is how power realities on the ground dictate. Mackinder, although firmly opposed to allowing Russia to dominate the Heartland, would see this outcome as the logical consequence of the lack of engagement from maritime powers (the USA and the United Kingdom, for example) in sustaining the Ukrainian counterattack. Without the active involvement of maritime power to balance the dispute, land power prevails in Eastern Europe.

From the perspective of international legitimacy, the cession of Ukrainian territories—whether de jure or de facto—creates a dangerous precedent in the post-Cold War era. Rewarding violent aggression with territorial gains may encourage similar strategies in other parts of the world, undermining the architecture of collective security. This is possibly a return to a world of spheres of influence, where great powers define borders and zones of control according to their convenience—something that the rules-based order after 1945 sought to avoid. Here, academic

impartiality requires noting that coercion for territorial concessions rarely produces lasting peace, as the aggrieved party—in this case, Ukraine—may accept temporarily but will continue to assert its rights in the long term, as has occurred with other territorial injustices in history.

Territorial Ambitions of Trump: Greenland and Canada

Beyond the Eurasian theater of war, Trump revived geopolitical ambitions involving territories traditionally allied with the US: Greenland (an autonomous territory of Denmark) and Canada. As early as 2019, during his first term, Trump shocked the world by proposing to buy Greenland—rich in minerals and strategically positioned in the Arctic. Upon his return to power, he went further: expressing a “renewed interest” in acquiring Greenland and publicly suggesting the incorporation of Canada as the 51st American state [2].

In January 2025, during a press conference at Mar-a-Lago, he even displayed maps in which the US and Canada appeared merged into a single country, while Greenland was marked as a future American possession [2]. Posts by the president on social media included satirical images with a map of North America where Canada was labeled “51st” and Greenland designated as “Our Land” [2].

Such moves were met with concern and disbelief by allies. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was caught on an open microphone warning that Trump’s fixation on annexation “is real” and not just a joke [7]. Trudeau emphasized that Washington appeared to covet Canada’s vast mineral resources, which would explain the insistence on the idea of absorption [7]. In public, Trump argued that Canadians “would be more prosperous as American citizens,” promising tax cuts and better services should they become part of the US [7]. On the Danish side, the reaction to the revived plan regarding Greenland was firmly negative—as it was in 2019—reaffirming that the territory is not for sale. Trump, however, insinuated that the issue might be one of national security, indicating that American possession of Greenland would prevent adverse influences (a reference to China and Russia in the Arctic) [2]. More worryingly, he refused to rule out the use of military means to obtain the island, although he assured that he had no intention of invading Canada by force (in the Canadian case, he spoke of “economic force” to forge a union) [2].

This series of initiatives reflects an unprecedented expansionist impetus by the US in recent times, at least in discourse. Analyzing this through the lens of classical geopolitics offers interesting insights. Friedrich Ratzel and his notion of Lebensraum suggest that powerful states, upon reaching a certain predominance, seek to expand their territory by influencing or incorporating adjacent areas. Trump, by targeting the immediate neighbor (Canada) and a nearby strategic territory (Greenland), appears to resurrect this logic of territorial expansion for the sake of gaining space and resources. Ratzel saw such expansion almost as a natural process for vigorous states, comparable to the growth of an organism [11]. From this

perspective, the US would be exercising its “right” of expansion in North America and the polar region, integrating areas of vital interest.

Additionally, Alfred Mahan’s view on maritime power helps to understand the strategic value of Greenland. Mahan postulated that control of key maritime chokepoints and naval bases ensures global advantage [9]. Greenland, situated between the North Atlantic and the Arctic, has become increasingly relevant as climate change opens new polar maritime routes and reveals vast mineral deposits (including rare earth elements and oil). For the US, having a presence or sovereignty over Greenland would mean dominating the gateway to the Arctic and denying this space to rivals. This aligns with Mahan’s strategy of securing commercial and military routes (in this case, potential Arctic routes) and resources to consolidate naval supremacy. On the other hand, the incorporation of Canada—with its enormous territory, Arctic coastline, and abundant natural resources—would provide the US with formidable geoeconomic and geopolitical reinforcement, practically eliminating vulnerabilities along its northern border. This is an ambitious project that also echoes ideas of Kjellén, for whom an ideal State should seek territorial completeness and economic self-sufficiency within its region. Incorporating Canada would be the pinnacle of American regional autarky, turning North America into a unified bloc under Washington (a scenario reminiscent of the “pan-regions” conceived by twentieth-century geopoliticians influenced by Kjellén).

It is important to note, however, that these ambitions face enormous legal and political obstacles. The sovereignty of Canada and Greenland (Denmark) is guaranteed by international law, and both peoples categorically reject the idea of annexation. Any hostile action by the US against these countries would shake alliances and the world order itself. Even so, the very fact that an American president suggests such possibilities already produces geopolitical effects: traditional partners begin to distrust Washington’s intentions, seek alternative alliances, and strengthen nationalist discourses of resistance. In summary, Trump’s expansionist intentions in Greenland and Canada rekindle old territorial issues and paradoxically place the US in the position of a revisionist power—a role once associated with empires in search of colonies.

Implications for Brazil and South America: A New Neocolonization?

In light of this geopolitical reconfiguration driven by Trump's USA—with a reordering of alliances and a possible partition of spheres of influence among great powers—the question arises: what is the impact on Brazil and the other countries of South America? Traditionally, Latin America has been under the aegis of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which established non-interference by Europe in the region and, implicitly, the primacy of the USA in the Western Hemisphere. In the post–Cold War period, this influence translated more into political and economic leadership, without formal annexations or direct territorial domination. However, the current context points to a kind of “neocolonization” of the Global South, in which larger powers seek to control resources and peripheral governments in an indirect yet effective manner.

Mackinder's theories can be used to illuminate this dynamic. As mentioned, Mackinder envisioned the twentieth-century world as a closed system, in which there were no longer any unknown lands to be colonized—hence, the powers would fight among themselves for control over already occupied regions [3]. He predicted that Africa and Latin America (then largely European colonies or semi-colonies) would continue as boards upon which the great powers would project their disputes, a form of neocolonialism. In the current scenario, we see the USA proposing exchanges of protection for resources (as in Ukraine) and even leaders of developing countries seeking similar agreements. A notable example: the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, praised the USA–Ukraine initiative and suggested an analogous agreement involving Congolese mineral wealth in exchange for US support against internal rebels (M23) [19]. In other words, African countries and possibly South American ones may enter into this logic of offering privileged access to resources (cobalt, lithium, food, biodiversity) in order to obtain security guarantees or investments. This represents a regression to the times when external powers dictated the directions of the South in exchange for promises of protection, characterizing a strategic neocolonialism.

For Brazil, in particular, this rearrangement generates both opportunities and risks. As a regional power with considerable diplomatic autonomy, Brazil has historically sought to balance relationships with the USA, Europe, China, and other actors, avoiding automatic alignments. However, in a world where Trump's USA is actively redefining spheres of influence—possibly making deals with Russia that divide priorities (for example, Washington focusing on the Western Hemisphere and Moscow on the Eastern)—South America could once again be seen as an exclusive American sphere of influence. From this perspective, Washington could pressure South American countries to align with its directives, limiting partnerships with rivals (such as China) and seeking privileged access to strategic resources (such as the Amazon, fresh water, minerals, and agricultural commodities). Some indications are already emerging: Trump's transactional approach mentioned by Nye included pressures on Canada and Mexico regarding border and trade issues, under the threat of commercial sanctions. It would not be unthinkable to adopt a hard line, for example, with regard to Brazilian environmental policies (linked to the Amazon) or Brazil's relations with China, using tariffs or incentives as leverage—a sort of geopolitics of economic coercion.

On the other hand, Brazil and its neighbors could also attempt to take advantage of the Sino–North American competition. If the USA is distracted consolidating its hemispheric “hard power” hegemony (even with annexation fantasies in the north), powers such as China may advance their economic presence in South America through investments and trade (Belt and Road, infrastructure financing)—which is already happening. This would constitute an indirect neocolonial dispute in the South: Chinese loans and investments versus American demands and agreements, partly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century imperial competition (when the United Kingdom, USA, and others competed for Latin American markets and resources).

From a conceptual standpoint, Mackinder might classify South America as part of the “Outer Crescent” (external insular crescent)—peripheral to the great Eurasian “World-Island,” yet still crucial as a source of resources and a strategic position in the South Atlantic and Pacific. If the

USA consolidates an informal empire in the Americas, it would be reinforcing its “insular bastion” far from the Eurasian Heartland, a strategy that Mackinder once suggested for maritime powers: to control islands and peripheral continents to compensate for the disadvantage of not controlling the Heartland. However, an excessive US dominance in the South could lead to local resistance and alternative alignments, unbalancing the region.

Kjellén would add that for Brazil to maintain its decisive sovereignty, it will need to strengthen its autarky and internal cohesion—in other words, reduce vulnerabilities (economic, military, social) that external powers might exploit [4]. Meanwhile, Mahan might point out the importance for Brazil of controlling its maritime routes and coastlines (South Atlantic) to avoid being at the mercy of a naval power like the USA. And Ratzel would remind us that states that do not expand their influence tend to be absorbed by foreign influences—which, in the context of Brazil, does not mean conquering neighboring territories, but rather actively leading South American integration to create a block more resilient to external intrusion.

In summary, South America finds itself in a more competitive and segmented world, where major players are resurrecting practices from past eras. The notion of “neocolonization” here does not imply direct occupation, but rather mechanisms of dependency: whether through unequal economic agreements or through diplomatic or military pressure for alignment. Brazil, as the largest economy and territory on the subcontinent, will have to navigate with heightened caution. A new global power balance, marked by the division of spheres of influence among the USA, China, and Russia, may reduce the sovereign maneuvering space of South American countries unless they act jointly. Thus, theoretical reflection suggests the need for South–South strategies, reinforcement of regional organizations, and diversification of partnerships to avoid falling into modern “neocolonial traps.”

Conclusion

The emerging post–re-election geopolitical conjuncture of Donald Trump signals a return to classical geopolitical principles, after several decades of predominance of institutional liberal views. We witness the revaluation of concepts such as spheres of influence, exchanges of protection for resources, naval power versus land power, and disputes over territory and raw materials—all central themes in the writings of Mackinder, Mahan, Kjellén, and Ratzel at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. An impartial analysis of these events, in light of these theories, shows internal coherence in Trump’s actions: although controversial, they follow a logic of maximizing national interest and the relative power of the USA on the world stage, even at the expense of established principles and alliances.

Halford Mackinder reminds us that, in a closed world with no new lands to conquer, the great powers will seek to redistribute the world among themselves [3]. This seems to manifest in the direct understandings between the USA and Russia over the fate of Ukraine, and in American ambitions in the Arctic and the Western Hemisphere. Alfred Mahan emphasizes that the control of the seas and strategic positions ensures supremacy—we see reflections of this in Trump’s obsession with Greenland (Arctic) and the possible neglect of the importance of maintaining

NATO (and therefore the North Atlantic) as a cohesive bloc, something that Mahan's theory would criticize due to the risk of a naval vacuum. Rudolf Kjellén and Friedrich Ratzel provide the framework to understand the more aggressive facet of expansionist nationalism: the idea of the State as an organism that needs to grow, secure resources, and seek self-sufficiency explains everything from the extortionate agreement imposed on Ukraine to the annexation rhetoric regarding Canada.

The potential consequences are profound. In the short term, we may witness a precarious ceasefire in the Ukraine war, with consolidated Russian territorial gains and Ukraine economically tied to the USA, but without formal military protection—a fragile “armed peace.” Western Europe, alarmed, may accelerate its independent militarization, perhaps marking the beginning of European defense autonomy, as is already openly debated [1]. At the far end of the globe, American activism in the Arctic and the Americas may reshape alliances: countries like Canada, once aligned with Washington, might seek to guarantee their sovereignty by distancing themselves from it; powers like China could take advantage of the openings to increase their presence in Latin America and Africa through economic diplomacy; and emerging countries of the Global South may have to choose between submitting to new “guardianships” or strengthening South–South cooperation.

Ultimately, the current situation reinforces the relevance of studying geopolitics through historical lenses. The actions of the Trump administration indicate that, despite all technological and normative advances, the competition for geographic power has not disappeared—it has merely assumed new formats. Academic impartiality obliges us not to prematurely judge whether these strategies will be successful or beneficial, but history and theory warn that neo-imperial movements tend to generate counter-reactions. As Mackinder insinuated, “every shock or change anywhere reverberates around the world,” and a sudden move by a superpower tends to provoke unforeseen adjustments and chain conflicts. It remains to be seen how the other actors—including Brazil and its neighbors—will adapt to this new chapter in the great struggle for global power, in which centuries-old theories once again have a surprising explanatory power over present events.

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