

# 'Blue national soil' and the unwelcome return of 'classical' geopolitics

Richardson, Paul

DOI:

[10.1080/14781158.2015.989199](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2015.989199)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Richardson, P 2015, "Blue national soil" and the unwelcome return of 'classical' geopolitics', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 229-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2015.989199>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



# Global Change, Peace & Security

formerly *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*

ISSN: 1478-1158 (Print) 1478-1166 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpar20>

## 'Blue national soil' and the unwelcome return of 'classical' geopolitics

Paul Richardson

To cite this article: Paul Richardson (2015) 'Blue national soil' and the unwelcome return of 'classical' geopolitics, *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 27:2, 229-236, DOI: [10.1080/14781158.2015.989199](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2015.989199)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2015.989199>



© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.



Published online: 03 Feb 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2860



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

## COMMUNICATION ARTICLE

### ‘Blue national soil’ and the unwelcome return of ‘classical’ geopolitics

Paul Richardson\*

*School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures, University of Manchester, UK*

This paper discusses how geopolitical visions from an earlier century are being reanimated in certain quarters of the political, intellectual, and military elite in the United States in order to frame recent shifts in China’s status in the international system. However, these deterministic geopolitical lenses – like the historical antecedents they draw on – are misconceived and counter-productive, missing the sophistication and fluidity of world politics. It is suggested here that such reductionist geopolitical categories instead work to narrow the space for mutual understanding and deny the multiple versions of power and sovereignty in the world today.

**Keywords:** geopolitics; sovereignty; hegemony; China; United States

### An invited and an uninvited empire

In certain quarters of the United States’ foreign policy community, reductionist geopolitical categories from a previous age are once again being reanimated as devices for delivering supposed insights into the contemporary international system, and for explaining and interpreting China’s current ambitions in world politics. While these clouded geopolitical lenses bring a certain degree of clarity – by effacing and erasing the intricate and dynamic nuances of place and politics – they simultaneously work to narrow the space for mutual understanding and obscure the interconnectedness and shared interests of states within our world.

In these geopolitical visions, the community of states around the South China Sea is being framed as on the brink of fracturing along bi-polar lines. On the one hand, this has been achieved by rehabilitating the rhetoric and practices of ‘classical’ geopolitics in order to interpret China’s elevated status in regional and world politics, while at the same time there has been an affirmation of the United States as a benign hegemon in the Asia–Pacific region, which is guaranteeing order, stability, and the ‘global commons’. It is a process that has assumed a new urgency and significance after the catastrophes of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

The enduring image of the United States as a benevolent hegemon is widely accepted by a broad coalition of US elites and has been succinctly outlined in a recent paper by John Ikenberry, who sketches a world where the United States has established leadership not simply through the exercise of power but together with sustained efforts at global problem solving and rule making.<sup>1</sup> It is an order based on the superstructure of a US-led network of alliances, institutions, geopolitical bargains, client states, and democratic partnerships, where the United States is an ‘empire by

---

\*Email: [paul.richardson-3@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:paul.richardson-3@manchester.ac.uk)

1 G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order’, *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141212/g-john-ikenberry/the-illusion-of-geopolitics> (accessed July 28, 2014).

invitation'.<sup>2</sup> This corresponds to what the geographer John Agnew has termed the globalist sovereignty regime, where various international and global norms over human rights, economic and monetary policy, and governmental behaviour – largely conceived and promoted by the US – have spread to other states' political and judicial practice.<sup>3</sup>

This globalist hegemonic order rests on the United States' ability to exercise extra-territorial sovereignty through military supremacy and global reach, at the same time as occupying a position at the centre of world politics through leverage of the global financial system, complex regional alliances, and cultural 'soft power'.<sup>4</sup> In this there are certain features of Hardt and Negri's understanding of *Empire*, which they regard as a 'U.S. constitutional project' based on a 'model of rearticulating an open space and reinventing incessantly diverse and singular relations in networks across an unbounded terrain'.<sup>5</sup>

Such a model of networked sovereignty necessitates its constant affirmation by political elites at the highest level. It is a concept encapsulated in President Barack Obama's West Point Commencement Speech, when in May 2014 he noted that 'From Europe to Asia, we are the hub of alliances unrivalled in the history of nations'.<sup>6</sup> His speech was followed just days later by then Secretary of Defense Chuck Hegel stating at the Shangri-La security forum that, 'Today, perhaps more than ever, one of America's greatest sources of strength is its network of partners and allies'.<sup>7</sup> The dilemma for this networked sovereignty regime is that the rise and fall of states – both within and outside of this network – causes great confusion, consternation, uncertainty, and insecurity amongst the policy elites articulating it. The rest of this paper attempts to chart how certain members of the political, military, and intellectual elite in the United States have used the rhetoric of 'classical' geopolitics to contrast the rapidly changing role of China in the international system with the supposed order and stability of the prevailing US-led globalist regime.

## The global commons versus 'blue national soil'

The sharpest distinctions over China's geopolitical/territorial challenge to the globalist order have come most recently through representations of its claims over scraps of land at sea, and the vast maritime zones that come with them. This is posed as a challenge to the benign hegemony of the United States, which – in this version of world politics – is entrusted with preserving the 'global commons'. As Frank Hoffman, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, has put it:<sup>8</sup>

For many years, Britain's Royal Navy was the ultimate guarantor of the global commons. That great tradition and responsibility was transferred to the American Navy after World War II. For the better part of the last half century, the U.S. Navy [has] ensured strategic access and served as the principal protector of international stability.<sup>9</sup>

The potential rupture to this stability became sharply emphasized after China's 2009 claim to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf at the United Nations of a 'nine-dashed line',

2 Ibid.; Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952', *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 263–77.

3 John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

4 Ibid., 131–2.

5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xiv, 182.

6 Barack Obama, 'Obama Sees US as the "Hub of Alliances" Unrivaled in History', *Atlantic Council*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/obama-sees-us-as-the-hub-of-alliances-unrivaled-in-history> (accessed July 28, 2014).

7 Chuck Hegel, 'The United States' Contribution to Regional Stability', *Shangri-la Security Summit 2014*, May 31, 2014, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/2014-c20c/plenary-1-d1ba/chuck-hagel-a9cb> (accessed June 3, 2014).

8 Part of the National Defense University, Washington, DC.

9 Frank Hoffman, 'The Maritime Commons in the Neo-Mahanian Era', in *Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World*, ed. Abraham Denmark and James Mulvenon (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010), 52.

which covers most of the South China Sea.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of this announcement, China became increasingly represented as a ‘territorial’ rival to the norms and values that the globalist state claims to uphold. An op-ed by George Will in the *Washington Post* in March 2011 captured the concerns amongst a broad swathe of US policy elites when it stated that ‘China seems increasingly inclined to define the oceans off its shores as extensions of the shores – territory to be owned and controlled like “blue national soil”’.<sup>11</sup> In *The Diplomat*, James Holmes, Professor of Strategy at the US Naval War College, suggested that China’s claim to this ‘blue national soil ... envisions exercising the absolute territorial sovereignty at sea that governments exercise within their land frontiers. It would reserve the right to infringe on freedom of navigation’.<sup>12</sup> For Holmes, it is imperative that the ‘commons must remain the commons, lest the system of liberal trade and commerce collapse on itself’.<sup>13</sup>

At the policy level, Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, declared at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi in July 2010 that, ‘The United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea’.<sup>14</sup> The following year, the United States Senate voted unanimously to pass a resolution ‘supporting the continuation of operations by U.S. armed forces in support of freedom of navigation rights in international water and air space in the South China Sea’.<sup>15</sup>

Accompanying this political response to China’s maritime claims has been a proliferation of articles amongst academics and Washington-based think tanks on how Chinese officials and officers are feverishly studying the ideas of the nineteenth century American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan. They are apparently enthusiastically embracing Mahan’s theories of ensuring command over the sea through the concentration of naval forces, control of strategic locations, and the importance of a decisive engagement to neutralize an enemy’s fleet. An article in *Foreign Affairs* by the journalist and self-proclaimed geopolitical analyst Robert D. Kaplan<sup>16</sup> claimed that:

Still an insecure sea power, [China] thinks about the ocean territorially ... In thinking in such a zero-sum fashion about their country’s adjoining seas, China’s naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century U.S. naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued for sea control and the decisive battle.<sup>17</sup>

Kaplan is not alone in making an analogy with Mahan, and parallels have been drawn between today’s situation in the South China Sea, and the United States’ bid for pre-eminence in the

10 Robert Beckman and Tara Davenport, ‘CLCS Submissions and Claims in the South China Sea’, *East Sea Studies*, August 16, 2011, <http://nghiencuubiendong.vn/en/conferences-and-seminars-/second-international-workshop/608-clcs-submissions-and-claims-in-the-south-china-sea-by-robert-c-beckman-a-tara-davenport> (accessed January 23, 2013). China’s official declaration of the nine-dashed line is also now emblazoned on newly issued Chinese passports; see Patrick M. Cronin, ‘As the World Rebalances in the Asian-Pacific Century, so must the United States’, *Global Asia* 7, no. 4 (2012), <http://www.globalasia.org/Issue/ArticleDetail/62/as-the-world-rebalances-in-the-asian-pacific-century-so-must-the-united-states.html> (accessed January 22, 2014).

11 George Will, ‘The “Blue National Soil” of China’s Navy’, *Washington Post*, March 18, 2011, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-03-18/opinions/35208579\\_1\\_mahan-china-and-east-china-powerful-navy](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-03-18/opinions/35208579_1_mahan-china-and-east-china-powerful-navy) (accessed January 20, 2013).

12 James Holmes, ‘The Commons: Beijing’s “Blue National Soil”’, *The Diplomat*, January 3, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/a-threat-to-the-commons-blue-national-soil/> (accessed January 20, 2013).

13 Ibid.

14 Nguyen Manh Hung, ‘Drawing a Line in the South China Sea: Why Beijing Needs to Show Restraint’, *Global Asia* 7, no. 4 (2012), <http://www.globalasia.org/Issue/ArticleDetail/70/drawing-a-line-in-the-south-china-sea-why-beijing-needs-to-show-restraint.html> (accessed January 22, 2014).

15 Ibid.

16 Kaplan is a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington. In 2009, he was appointed to the Defense Policy Board, a federal advisory committee to the United States Department of Defense.

17 Robert D. Kaplan, ‘The Geography of Chinese Power’, *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2010): 22–41, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66205/robert-d-kaplan/the-geography-of-chinese-power> (accessed January 22, 2014).

Caribbean over a century before.<sup>18</sup> Hoffman refers to a ‘neo-Mahanian era’,<sup>19</sup> while Holmes suggests that, ‘Like the [Caribbean] waterways that obsessed Mahan, [the South China Sea] contains waterways of critical importance to national prosperity ... Geography has concentrated minds in Beijing’.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time as invoking Mahan, other scholars and commentators have drawn parallels to China’s ambitions and the administration of James Monroe (1817–25) and the desire to keep European powers out of the Americas. Stephen Walt insisted in a *New York Times* article, entitled *Dealing with a Chinese Monroe Doctrine*, that, ‘By the same logic, a powerful China will not want the United States to have close alliances and a large military presence near its borders, and it will undoubtedly try to push U.S. forces out of the Asia-Pacific region’.<sup>21</sup>

Such consternation reveals a fear in some quarters that from a Mahanian/Monroeian perspective, geostrategic control of the South China Sea (just as it did for the United States in the Caribbean) will herald a revision of the current world order. An affirmation of the benefits of this prevailing order has seemingly become a key focus of US policy towards the region. As Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor to the President (2010–13), recently asked: would safe sea lanes have fuelled Pacific commerce, and would smaller nations have been protected from domination by bigger neighbours without the US guarantee of security and stability?<sup>22</sup> For Donilon the answer is obvious and the US turn to the Asia Pacific is ‘a response to the strong demand signal from leaders and publics across the region for U.S. leadership, economic engagement, sustained attention to regional institutions and defense of international rules and norms’.<sup>23</sup> These appeals to ‘stability’, ‘demand signals’, ‘institutions’, ‘rules and norms’ represent key features of a globalist understanding of US sovereignty, which work to legitimate a particular response to the ‘territorial’ challenge that China is apparently posing to Asia’s maritime ‘commons’.

## Mackinder’s long shadow

Alongside Mahan and Monroe, there has also been a flurry of interest in the geographer, politician, and champion of the British Empire, Sir Halford Mackinder, who, in 1904, wrote his famous and evocatively titled paper ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’.<sup>24</sup> Mackinder believed that the arrival of a network of railways across Inner Eurasia (a region that he termed the ‘Pivot Area’, and later the ‘Heartland’) would provide tsarist Russia – or whichever state controlled this space – with the mobility necessary to claim, exploit, and defend the resources of a vast continental area.<sup>25</sup> As he famously put it: ‘Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island [the joint continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa]; Who rules the World Island commands the World’.<sup>26</sup>

It does not take a close reading of Mackinder to note the insecurities and challenges that this scenario would pose to the British Empire and its worldwide network of trade, overseas territories,

18 James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, ‘China’s “Caribbean” in the South China Sea’, *SAIS Review* 26, no. 1 (2006): 79–92.

19 Hoffman, ‘The Maritime Commons’.

20 James Holmes, ‘China Takes a Page out of Mahan’, *Taipei Times*, February 6, 2006, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2006/02/06/2003291824> (accessed February 26, 2013).

21 Stephen Walt, ‘Dealing with a Chinese Monroe Doctrine’, *New York Times*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/05/02/are-we-headed-for-a-cold-war-with-china/dealing-with-a-chinese-monroe-doctrine> (accessed December 28, 2012).

22 Tom Donilon, ‘Remarks by Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor to the President: “The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013”’, March 11, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisory-president-united-states-a> (accessed November 13, 2013).

23 Ibid.

24 Halford Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1904): 421–37.

25 Ibid.

26 Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (London: Constable and Company, 1919), 194.

military bases, access to resources, naval supremacy, and the economic, political, and military advantages associated with its leadership of the prevailing global system at the time. While Mackinder was proved entirely wrong – it was in fact the United States that assumed the primacy Great Britain had once occupied – this detail has not affected the enduring appeal of his imperial geopolitics.

Not for the first time, Mackinder's ideas have found a new appreciation as a device for interpreting contemporary events in world politics. In his 2010 *Foreign Affairs* article, Kaplan recalled the closing lines of Mackinder's paper and its 'disturbing reference to China'.<sup>27</sup> He noted how Mackinder had posited that should the Chinese expand their power well beyond their borders, then they 'might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent'.<sup>28</sup> Kaplan is convinced that China's 'blessed geography' – as a land and sea power – ensures the country 'will stand at the hub of geopolitics' in the current century.<sup>29</sup> He uses the logic of Mackinder in exactly the way the British imperialist had done a century earlier: to frame a geopolitical threat to the world's pre-eminent, hegemonic, globalist power, and the appropriate response of containment.<sup>30</sup>

However, what is perhaps most intriguing about the reanimation of Mackinder's ideas, is that this appreciation of 'classical' geopolitics has expanded beyond the sphere of foreign affairs punditry and one of its most notable advocates has been Admiral Patrick Walsh, former Commander of the US Pacific Fleet (2009–12). Walsh has specifically cited the merits of Mackinder in a number of interviews, asserting that by applying Mackinder's geographic insights to Asia, 'You can identify where the critical node is'.<sup>31</sup> For Walsh, this happens to be the South China Sea and for any country to exert economic, political, diplomatic, or military influence beyond its own region, it requires 'control of, or a sustained presence in, a "strategic pivot"'.<sup>32</sup> As he makes clear, this pivot should determine where the US positions its forces, as if China is allowed to exert its sovereignty unchecked in this region then he insists that it 'can change the norms of behaviour ... you can't let one country just sort of dominate all of that economic activity and expect that the world would continue to function as it is'.<sup>33</sup>

Walsh's strategic concept – outlined in a classified paper produced while still Commander of the Pacific Fleet – appeared to have inspired some influence beyond his Pearl Harbor headquarters when his Mackinderian logic surfaced in a well-known article by Hillary Clinton in *Foreign Policy* magazine in November 2011.<sup>34</sup> In this article, Clinton stresses in the space of a few lines how 'the United States stands at a *pivot* point'; 'we need to accelerate efforts to *pivot* to new global realities'; and '[t]his kind of *pivot* is not easy, but we have paved the way for it over the past two-and-a-half years'.<sup>35</sup> As is clear from the rest of her article, much of this

---

27 Kaplan, 'The Geography'.

28 Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot', 437.

29 Kaplan, 'The Geography'.

30 See also the discussion in Monika Chansoria and Paul Richardson, 'Placing China in America's Strategic "Pivot" to the Asia-Pacific: The Centrality of Halford Mackinder's Theory', *CLAWS Journal* (Summer 2012): 78–87.

31 Richard Halloran, 'The Rising East: Walsh looks to Mackinder for Naval Strategy', *Honolulu Civil Beat*, January 20, 2012, <http://www.civilbeat.com/articles/2012/01/20/14645-the-rising-east-walsh-looks-to-mackinder-for-naval-strategy/> (accessed November 27, 2013).

32 Katherine Hyde, 'Operation Tomodachi: Support, Compassion, Commitment', *Japan Society*, November 15, 2011, <http://www.japansociety.org/page/multimedia/articles/operation-tomodachi-support-compassion-commitment> (accessed November 27, 2013).

33 Yoichi Kato, 'Interview: Patrick Walsh: South China Sea could be a New "Strategic Pivot"', *Asahi Shimbun*, March 21, 2012, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201203210024> (accessed November 27, 2013).

34 Halloran, 'The Rising East'.

35 Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas\\_pacific\\_century](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century) (accessed December 3, 2013), emphasis added.



‘pivoting’ is of a military orientation – a trajectory since confirmed by a series of deployments in the region and joint military exercises with US allies and partners in the South China Sea.<sup>36</sup>

Although at the official level, the language of ‘pivot’ has more recently been softened to a ‘rebalancing’,<sup>37</sup> there endures the perceived necessity of consolidating an image of the United States as a benevolent hegemon, overseeing the ‘commons’, and the guarantor of the global/regional order. Just as in the age of Mackinder, representations of this order – and more precisely the challenges to it – are revealing much about the anxieties and apprehensions of certain members of the globalist elite, and rather less about China’s motivations and preoccupations in global and regional politics. Such framings – perhaps intentionally – are simultaneously working to reduce the space for alternative Chinese behaviour.<sup>38</sup>

It is also perhaps unsurprising that the Mackinderian logic underpinning the US ‘pivot’ did not go unnoticed in China, and shortly after Clinton’s announcement, Deputy Director of the PLA’s Academy of Military Sciences Zhiyuan Lin stated in the *People’s Daily* that the United States had already ‘strengthened penetration in China’s surrounding regions’.<sup>39</sup> He also made reference to how some thinkers in the US Navy have become quite interested in the English geographer Halford Mackinder and his idea of ‘who rules the Heartland commands the World Island’.<sup>40</sup> However, here Lin inverts such neo-Mackinderian visions, suggesting that those followers of Mackinder in the United States who are applying his strategy to Asia are convinced that controlling the South China Sea will permit the US Air Force and Navy to command East Asia, and consequently to command the World Island.<sup>41</sup> For Lin, it is China defending the heartland – and itself – from the grand imperial designs of the United States.

## Laying to rest the ghosts of geopolitics past

This inversion of a Mackinderian framing of the region illustrates precisely how reductionist geopolitical lenses serve to polarize perspectives and engender insecurity on both sides. These geopolitical visions deny the complexities and contingencies of world politics, working to obfuscate China’s shared interest in furthering aspects of the prevailing globalist regime. This paper is not the first to point out that China broadly has the same shared interests as the United States in areas such as nuclear non-proliferation; that China is an active participant in mechanisms and institutions of global governance; and how, in certain cases, China has even gone further than the United States in ratifying international agreements – notably the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>42</sup> Scholars have also demonstrated how two decades ago China made the voluntary decision to pursue deepening international integration; to further pro-market domestic reforms; to bind itself by international regimes; and to support the existing, economically liberal global trading regime, and its major institutional enforcer, and symbol – the

36 Andrew Billo, ‘Co-operate and Share: A Way to Peace in the South China Sea’, *Global Asia* 8, no. 3 (2013), <http://www.globalasia.org/Issue/ArticleDetail/467/Co-operate-and-Share:-A-Way-to-Peace-in-the-South-China-Sea.html> (accessed December 4, 2013); Robert Ross, ‘The Problem with the Pivot: Obama’s New Asia Policy is Unnecessary and Counterproductive’, *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (2012): 70–82, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138211/robert-s-ross/the-problem-with-the-pivot> (accessed January 22, 2014); *BBC News online*, ‘Leon Panetta: US to Deploy 60% of Navy Fleet to Pacific’, June 2, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-18305750> (accessed January 22, 2014).

37 See Donilon, ‘Remarks’.

38 Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, ‘How China Sees America’, *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2012): 32–47, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/search/how%20china%20sees%20america> (accessed January 22, 2014); Oliver Turner, ‘“Threatening” China and US Security: The International Politics of Identity’, *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 4 (2013): 923.

39 Zhiyuan Lin, ‘America Threatens China: What Lies Behind the U.S. “Return to Asia” Strategy’, *People’s Daily*, December 29, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/102774/7689639.html> (accessed December 3, 2013).

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 See Ikenberry, ‘The Illusion’.



WTO.<sup>43</sup> As a result of its emergence as a major exporter with a persistent trade surplus within this system, China has increasingly come to share with the United States and the European Union a desire to pursue a bold trade liberalization agenda.<sup>44</sup> In this sense – and with China being for a number of years the primary holder of US treasury securities – the policies associated with the continued rise of China and the maintenance of US hegemony have often become complementary.<sup>45</sup>

However, this is not to say that these mutual interests or China's adherence to global norms and rules in the region is absolute. Indeed, there is a growing tension between China's repeated commitments to respecting international law, and its more assertive and unilateral actions in the South and East China Sea. Recent examples have included Chinese reclamation projects on the Spratlys (such as at South Johnson Reef, where there are suggestions China is planning to construct an airstrip);<sup>46</sup> the positioning in May 2014 of an oil rig of the state-run China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) to waters near the Paracel Islands, within what Vietnam considers its exclusive economic zone;<sup>47</sup> the establishment in November 2013 of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea;<sup>48</sup> and in June 2014 a refusal to accept a request by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague to respond to a memorandum on China's territorial and maritime claims filed by the Philippines in March 2014 under UNCLOS.<sup>49</sup>

Despite these actions, China remains careful to avoid or limit any perception of rejecting international norms. The establishment of China's ADIZ is represented as not being in direct violation of existing international rules or precedents on the establishment of ADIZs;<sup>50</sup> China is also only the latest of the claimants to instigate island reclamation projects on the Spratlys,<sup>51</sup> while the CNOOC oil rig near the Paracels was withdrawn just two months after its placement.<sup>52</sup> However, perhaps the most striking rejection of international agreements is China's refusal to accept the PCA's arbitration under UNCLOS.<sup>53</sup> Yet even here, the authority of UNCLOS is eroded by the United States' inability to add its signature to the Convention. As President

43 Wei Liang, 'China: Globalization and the Emergence of a New Status Quo Power?', *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 4 (2007): 132, 134.

44 *Ibid.*, 133.

45 *Ibid.*, 144.

46 Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, 'Pandora's Sandbox: China's Island Building Strategy in the South China Sea', *Foreign Affairs*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141632/andrew-s-erickson-and-austin-strange/pandoras-sandbox> (accessed October 21, 2014); Manuel Mogato, 'Philippines Says China Appears to be Building an Airstrip on Disputed Reef', *Reuters*, May 13, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/14/us-philippines-china-reef-idUSBREA4D00K20140514> (accessed October 21, 2014).

47 Ernest Bower and Gregory Poling, 'China-Vietnam Tensions High over Drilling Rig in Disputed Waters', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 7, 2014, <http://csis.org/publication/critical-questions-china-vietnam-tensions-high-over-drilling-rig-disputed-waters> (accessed October 21, 2014).

48 Eric Heginbotham, 'The Foreign Policy Essay: China's ADIZ in the East China Sea', *Lawfare*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/08/the-foreign-policy-essay-chinas-adiz-in-the-east-china-sea/> (accessed October 21, 2014).

49 'China Dismissed Philippine Court Case over Sea Row Claims', *BBC News*, June 5, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-27724283> (accessed October 21, 2014).

50 Shannon Tiezzi, 'How China Justifies its ADIZ – And How it Could Do Better', *The Diplomat*, December 4, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/how-china-justifies-its-adiz-and-how-it-could-do-better/> (accessed October 21, 2014).

51 Erickson and Strange, 'Pandora's Sandbox'.

52 Simon Denyer, 'China Withdraws Oil Rig from Waters Disputed with Vietnam, but Warns it Could Return', *Washington Post*, July 16, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-withdraws-oil-rig-from-waters-disputed-with-vietnam-but-warns-it-could-return/2014/07/16/51f584a0-6128-4cd4-bad0-cb547907be30\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-withdraws-oil-rig-from-waters-disputed-with-vietnam-but-warns-it-could-return/2014/07/16/51f584a0-6128-4cd4-bad0-cb547907be30_story.html) (accessed October 21, 2014).

53 'Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, December 7, 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1217147.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1217147.shtml) (accessed December 11, 2014).

Obama has ruefully noted: 'It's a lot harder to call on China to resolve its maritime disputes under the Law of the Sea Convention when the United States Senate has refused to ratify it.'<sup>54</sup>

The failure of the US Senate to endorse a twenty-first century mechanism for maritime dispute resolution misses a critical opportunity to widen the space for mutual understanding with China, to bind itself – and China – to the rules and norms it claims to uphold, and with it a chance to decisively counter the re-emergence of obsolete geopolitical theories that once rationalized past imperialism. Instead these tired geopolitical representations have been given space to exacerbate tensions in the region, deny complementarities, and belie the fact that China is seeking to guarantee its access to the global system rather than to deny others. They serve to over-determine and ossify understandings of China's behaviour into hard, bounded, deterministic conceptualizations, which miss the myriad of linkages, interconnections, and dynamism that define sovereignty, the global economy, and international relations in the modern age. Rather than providing critical insights into predicting China's actions in regional or world politics, these geopolitical framings work to intensify Chinese fears of containment, at the same time as they expose the prevailing fractures, anxieties, and insecurities of the globalist regime.

Whether it is because of their simplicity and ease of intelligibility, or the rhetorical power of charismatic and idiosyncratic advocates, or simply their play to an audience receptive to reassurance and stasis in times of rapid change, these geopolitical visions refuse to dissipate. It is through underplaying the role of global trade and finance, a disregard for the multiple versions of sovereignty and power that exist in the world, and a denial of the possibility for alternative perspectives in world politics that have allowed Mackinder, Mahan, and Monroe back onto the centre-stage of the globalist regime. Recognizing the inherent limitations of these defunct and deterministic geopolitical tropes is perhaps a starting point for ameliorating the dangerous and destabilizing processes that their uncritical recycling has initiated.

## Notes on contributor

Paul Richardson is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures at the University of Manchester. His recent research interests include Russia's national development strategy in the Far East, the Eurasian Union and reconfiguration of borders and identity in post-Soviet space, and the rise of nationalism and territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific region. He has published articles and reviews in the journals: *Politics*, *The Russian Analytical Digest*, *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, *The Scottish Geographical Journal*, and *Canadian Slavonic Papers*.

---

54 Jose Katigbak, 'Obama Calls on US Senate to ratify UNCLOS', *Philippine Star*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2014/05/30/1329020/obama-calls-us-senate-ratify-unclos> (accessed October 21, 2014).