

A New Geopolitical Pivot: The South China Sea

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Outline

- Puzzle
- Research Questions
- What is the ‘Pivot’?
- China’s Perspective
- U.S. Perspective
- Strategic Implications



Research Puzzle



Research Puzzle



Research Questions

- What are the geopolitical features of the Indo-Pacific?
- How the South China Sea has become a geopolitical pivot?

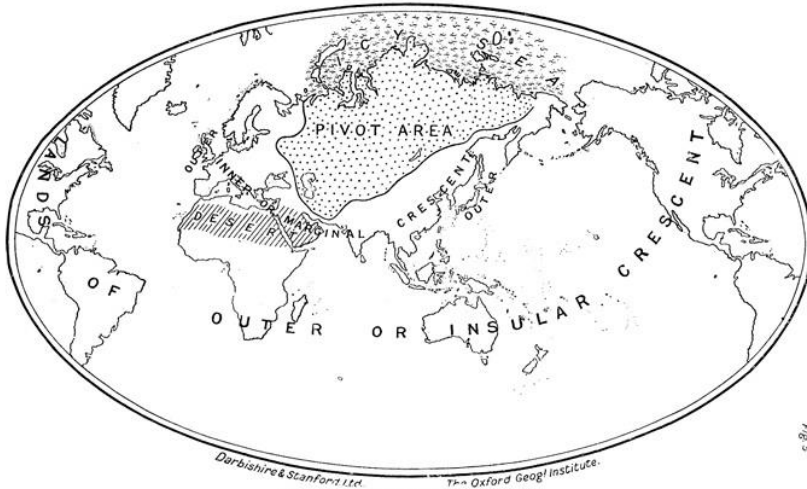


Pivot

- Pivot
 - Gives access to resource mobilisation and other regions
 - Mackinder (1904), Spykman (1944), and Brzezinski (1997)
 - Where major powers clashes
 - Geopolitical advantages by controlling it
 - Nor static or fixed



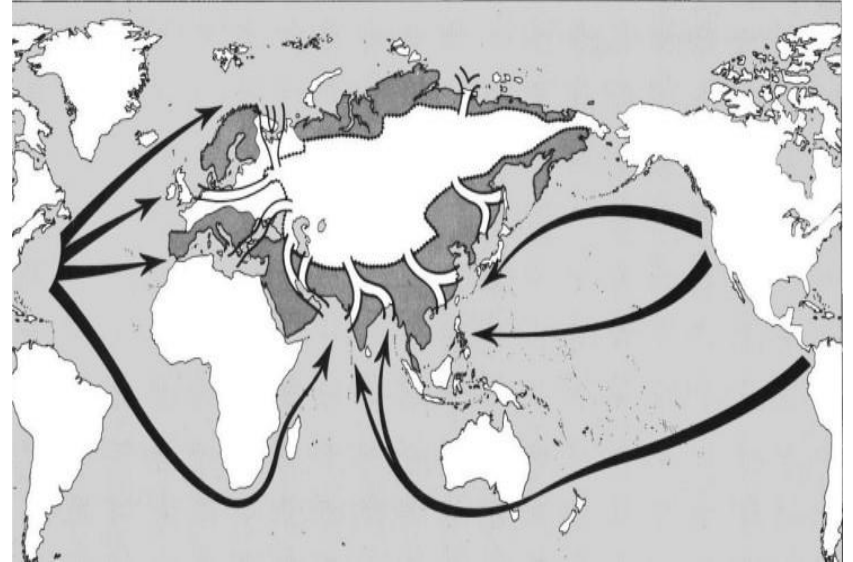
Pivot



THE NATURAL SEATS OF POWER.

Pivot area—wholly continental. Outer crescent—wholly oceanic. Inner crescent—partly continental, partly oceanic.

Heartland, Mackinder (1904)



Rimland, Spykman (1944)

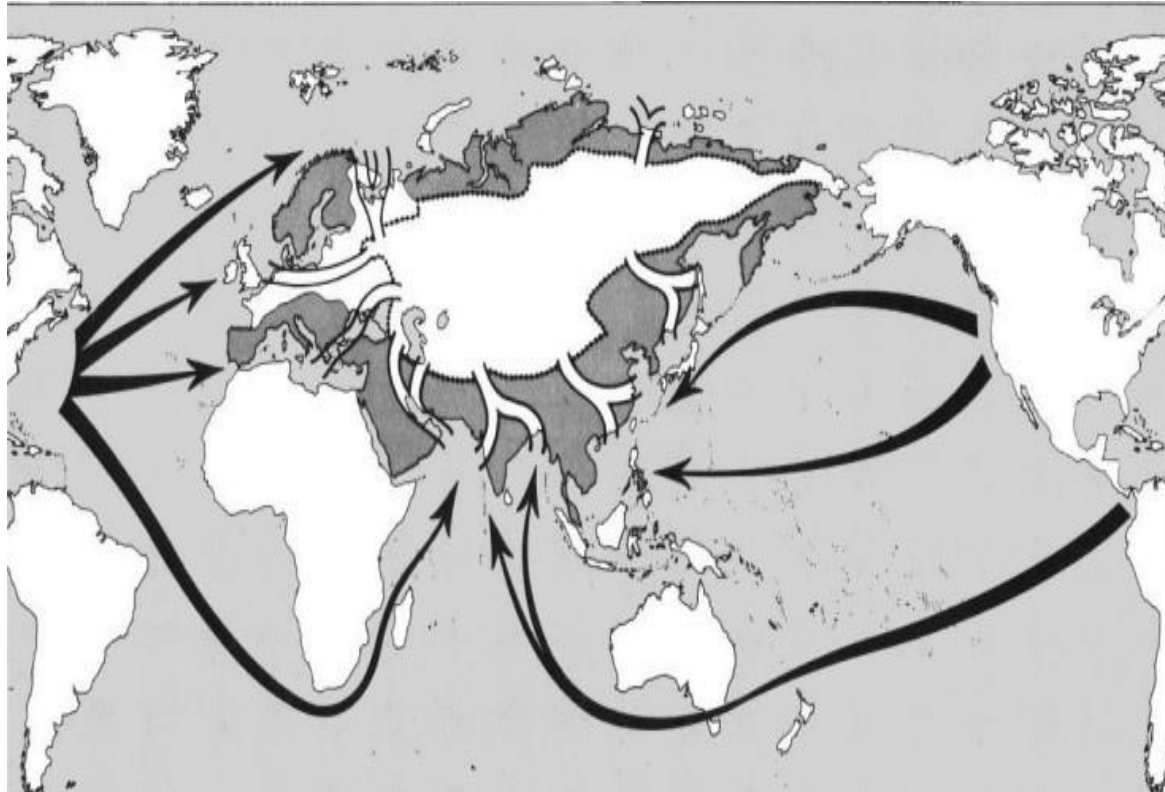


Pivot

- Brzezinski's pivot(s)
 - Ukraine
 - Azerbaijan
 - South Korea
 - Turkey
 - Iran



Pivot



South China Sea as a New Pivot

- Pivot
 - Gives access to resource mobilisation and other regions
- The South China Sea
 - China
 - Access to broader oceans
 - Trade itself is a resource (especially, energy)
 - U.S.
 - Front line of Chinese further influence expansion in the Indo-Pacific
 - Trade itself is a resource (allies' energy supply)





From China's perspective

- The goal of China in the South China Sea:
 - Securing maritime territorial claim
- Where more than 1/3 of global trade transits through
- Where massive oil reserves are
- Started to increase naval capabilities from the 2000s
 - Fortifying the South China Sea with artificial islands
- What if China justifies its claim over the South China Sea?
 - Controlling global maritime trade
 - Survival of U.S. allies in the region depends on the intention
 - Gives leverage to China for strategic competition



From the U.S. Perspective (1)

- The goal of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific:
 - Guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the region
 - But how? By denying China's territorial claim over the SCS
- One of the first mentions of the South China Sea
 - Hillary Clinton's visit to Hanoi in 2010
- Started to be active in the freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea in 2013
- The position of the U.S. started to be clear after the UNCLO's arbitral tribunal decision in 2016



From the U.S. Perspective (2)

- What if the U.S. lets China's claim over the SCS?
 - Loses allies' credibility
 - Key partners: Japan, Australia, and South Korea
 - Trade transits through the SCS are a survival issue for those countries
 - Japan and South Korea - Major crude petroleum is coming from the Middle East through the SCS
 - Australia, more than 90% of refined petroleum is coming from Asian countries, including South Korea (Second largest) through the SCS
 - This leads to the challenges of RBO including the concept of freedom of navigation to the survival issue



Strategic Implications

- Whether to deny or secure China's territorial claim over the South China Sea will determine the hegemonic transition in a broader sense
- Now, sea power has become a key component of power
 - The goal of strategic competition between the U.S. and China has become who controls the trade of the South China Sea
- Adding maritime perspective to previous continental-centric international relations theory



