

## **Russian “Eurasianism” & the Geopolitics of The Black Sea**

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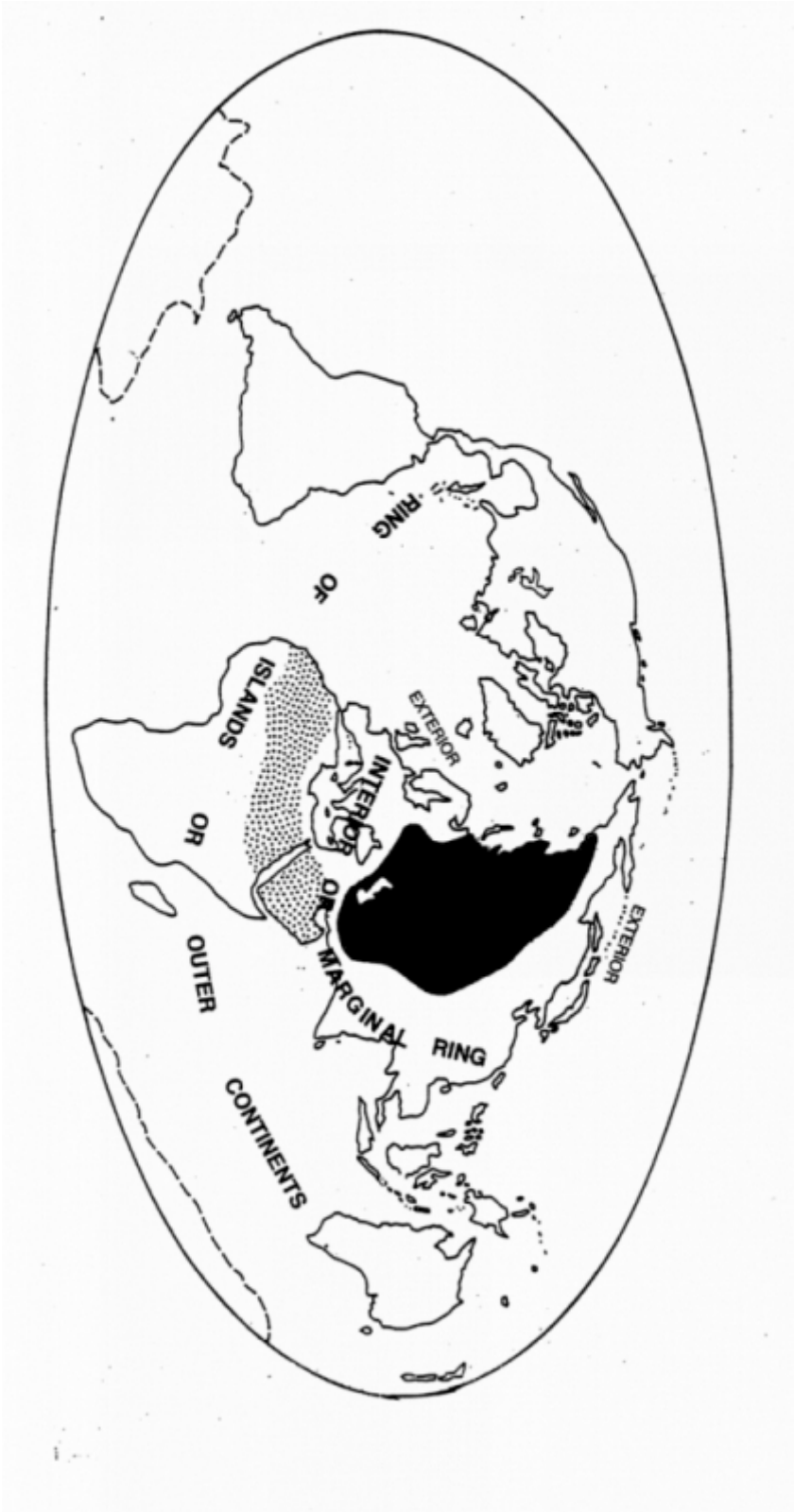
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Russia has always held a pivotal position in classical geopolitics. At the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, in the writings of the “father” of Anglo-Saxon geopolitical thought, the British author Halford Mackinder, can be seen the crystallisation of the geopolitical vision which depicted Russia as the “heartland” of Eurasia and of the wider international system. Two decades later, in 1921, the “Eurasianism” concept was born in Russia through the publication of a book by Peter Savitsky entitled “Exit towards the East”. The division of the planet into the “World Ocean” and the “World Island” by Mackinder (see Map 1), led also to the attribution to Russia of the most geopolitically desirable location in the world, through the axiom that whoever controls the heartland would be able to permanently dominate the Eurasian landmass and consequently gain a hegemony over the entire world.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent to this, the systematizer of the German geopolitical school Karl Haushofer, introduced the concept of “four spheres of vital area” (American, German, Russian, and Japanese).<sup>2</sup>

This idea seems to have influenced the Russian “Eurasian vision” during the proceedings for the signing of the German-Russian Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939. The Germans’ confirmation that the Soviet Union – by its accession to the Axis – would put under its occupation the central-Asian part of the planet, offered to the Soviet Union the possibility of unhindered access to the warm southern seas, particularly the Indian Ocean, rendering it geostrategically independent from the frozen seas of the North. Ribbentrop emphasised this benefit to the Soviet Union a great deal, speaking of a “natural outlet to the open seas which were so important for Russia.”<sup>3</sup> Hitler also stressed this advantage of the relationship in his talks with Stalin.<sup>4</sup> Stalin however, as he inclined more towards the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical way of thought, in addition to the control of the Persian Gulf also demanded control over Finland and over the Straits linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, strategic points that Germany was not willing to assign.<sup>5</sup>

The end of the Second World War led to the adoption of elements of Mackinder’s geopolitical theories, as well as those of the American geopolitical strategist Nicholas Spykman.<sup>6</sup> These ideas were reflected in the establishment of the NATO alliance, as an offset to the continuing “imperial policy” of the USSR.<sup>7</sup> Until its collapse in 1991, the Soviet Union presented itself as the potential liberator of the harassed social groups and of the underdeveloped third world countries, grafting onto the international order of the communist ideology a significant dose of “Eurasian” geopolitical vision. At the same time, from the geostrategic point of view, the West, following Mackinder’s and Spykman’s theories, had integrated to the “capitalist” camp those countries that controlled Moscow’s unhindered access to the warm seas of the South: South Korea and Japan in Far East, Germany and the Scandinavian countries in the European North and Greece and Turkey in the Mediterranean (see Map 2).

Map 1:



Map 2:



During the Cold War period as well as during the post-Cold War period, the Russian Eurasian vision was based on the geopolitical infrastructure that Mackinder had outlined and that aimed at making clear that Russia has a “unique identity”, which is differentiated from that of the West. In its most extreme version, the Eurasian heartland is presented by the Russian geopolitical school as the “geographic emanation field” for the realisation of an objective that longs for the “expulsion of the Atlantic (or even more specifically the “American”) influence from Eurasia.<sup>8</sup> In contradistinction with the principles of the Slavophiles which call for the unification of all the Slavs, Eurasianism is orientated southwards and eastwards and envisages the merger of the Orthodox and Muslim populations. As a geopolitical vision, Eurasianism is a curious medley in which communist ideology, nationalism and orthodox fundamentalism coexist. Although their principles are often contradictory and dogmatically confusing, these three ideologies, incorporated into the field of the geopolitical Eurasian vision constitute for many people Russia’s “third way”, building a bridge between extreme political parties.

The term “Eurasianism”, expressing a geopolitical theory which has made possible a political alliance between Left and Right in Russia, was elaborated during the post-soviet period, from 1993 and afterwards, thanks to the consistent advocacy of the newspaper “Zavtra” (“Tomorrow”). Its publisher, Aleksandr Prokanov, clearly dissociated the “imperial dimension” promoted by the Eurasianists from the attitude of the traditional nationalists, maintaining that: “The Eurasian idea is the idea of incorporation. Russian nationalism is Eurasianism’s opposite. The two ideologies are absolutely not compatible”.

The positions of the intellectual Aleksandr Dugin, who together with Prokanov became known as the main proponents of Eurasianism, are moving at parallel level. More specifically, Dugin, a former executive of the newspaper “Zavtra”, published in 1997 his book “The Principles of Geopolitics: The geopolitical future of Russia”. This book is considered by many to have benefited from significant contributions from officers of the Military Academy of the Russian General Staff.<sup>9</sup> In this work Dugin writes down the components of the specific distinction between the societies orientated towards the sea and the societies orientated towards the land, pointing out once more the correspondence of the West with maritime strength and of the East with land strength. More specifically, he maintains that an anti-west formation between Russia, Germany, Japan and Iran could become a barrier to the American penetration of Europe and Asia.

In contemporary Russian politics, Eurasianism has become a very influential concept reflecting the ideals and objectives of various political parties and not only of the nationalist Zirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, who in any case is an increasingly marginalised figure, whereas Putin can be seen as trying to balance between the western orientation and the Eurasian model.

One supporter of the Eurasian model is the former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov, whose policy has been identified by many people with the promotion of the ideas of Orientalism from as early as 1983, when he published a book entitled “The East after the fall of the colonial system”. In this work he argued that Russia’s role was to be the trustee of the rights of the “oppressed East”. This idea may have been reflected in his policy as Prime Minister, of promoting the “deepening” of Russia’s relations with the so-called “rogue” states of the Middle East.

Another strong supporter of the concept of Eurasianism is the leader of Russia’s communist party, Gennadiy Zyuganov. In 1995, he published his book “Beyond the horizon”, in which he argued that there is a historical connection of the Russian interpretation of the term “community” with the “communalism” of the orthodox dogma. From this perspective he advocated a role as “defender” of all the traditional societies, which for Zugarov are – as a consequence – socialist ones. In his most recent book “The Geography of Victory” (whose title is strongly reminiscent of the book “The Geography of Peace” by the American geopolitician and inspirer of the NATO strategy Nicholas Spykman), it is worth noting that he strengthens his pre-formulated arguments by arguing that there is a basic “incompatibility” between the Western civilisation and Russia. The deeper reasons for the non-convergence of the two civilisations is detected in the political infrastructure of the Western countries, which reflects the Athenian democratic form of government. The latter however, as Zyuganov stresses, also incorporates a non-desirable feature of classical Greek democracy, that of society’s division into citizens and slaves.

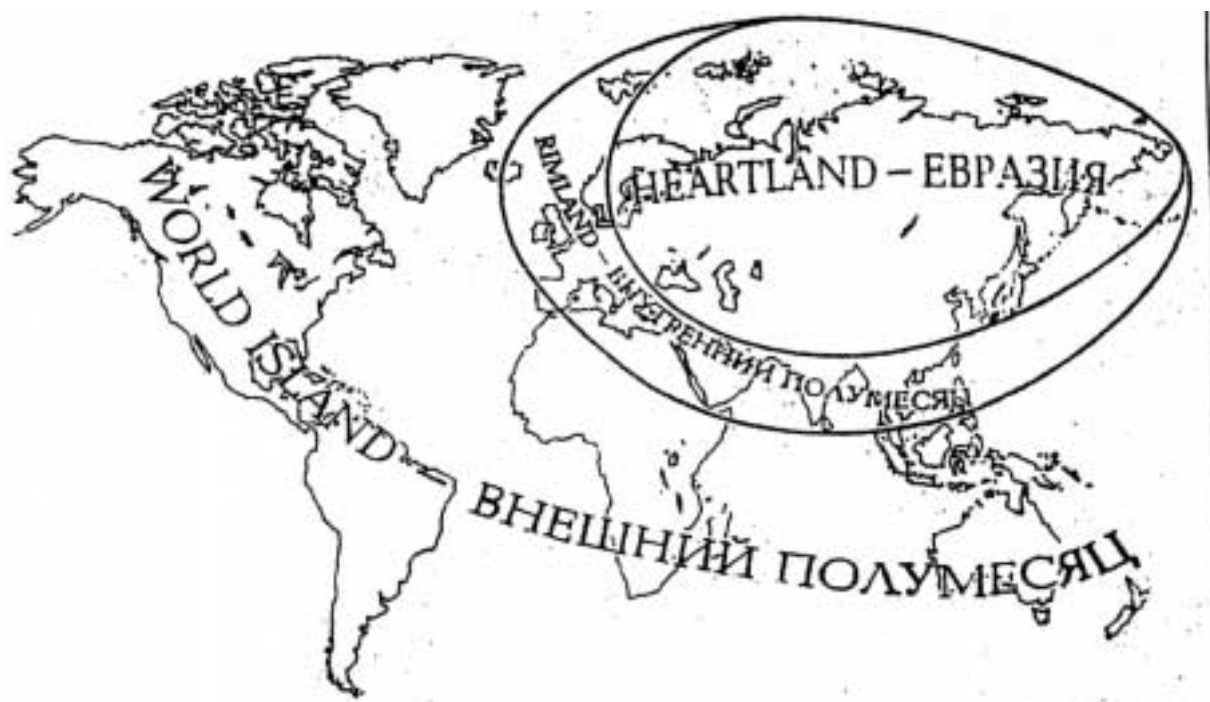
Concerning Russia’s orientation towards the East his suggestions are clearly expressed: “At the end of the 20th century it becomes more and more noticeable

that Islam's route is an alternative to the hegemony of the western civilisation". Under this prism, Russia must form a compact coalition where the orthodox populations, aiming at the creation of close relations with radical Islam, would harmoniously coexist with it. For Zyuganov, a fundamental principle is the belief that in the current era the implementation of geopolitical principles has become imperative. Russia should therefore have a clear geopolitical strategy. He uses the Eurasian vision in order to give the communist party a crucial political role as a major political force founded on a new basis. It is worth noting that Zyuganov plays the role of bridge-builder between the "white" and the "red" elements of Russian society, trying to combine nationalism, orthodoxy and Marxism.<sup>10</sup>

These geopolitical views are well known to western governments who have so far proven their ability to manage in a more or less successful way the geopolitical concerns of the Russian bear. Several western analysts, such as Zbigniew Brzezinski<sup>11</sup> insist on Russia's presentation as a potentially Eurasian superpower that wishes the total management of Eurasia and draw attention to the dangers for the West that may arise from any successful Russian-Chinese convergence – as was almost achieved during the cold war period and as Eurasianism currently preaches.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, it can be argued<sup>13</sup> that the most important recent American publication on this issue has the following key characteristics:

1. It was published in the journal "Foreign Affairs", which is generally perceived to be a semi-official print of the American foreign policy establishment.
2. Its author Charles Clover, is the Director of the "Financial Times" office in Ukraine, which is a reliable partner of the West at Russia's gate.<sup>14</sup>
3. It was published in the March-April 1999 issue, at a time when Washington was making the decision on the launching of the air attack against Yugoslavia. This attack had as an ulterior goal the complete dissolution of the geopolitical dynamic field that Russia intended to (or could) activate together with Serbia in the Balkan area and in the subsystem of the Adriatic "warm sea"<sup>15</sup> (see Map 3).

**Map 3:**



The Eurasianism issue brings in a new form the old "Eastern Question". This, according to the geopolitical approach, consists in the conflict provoked in the broader area of the Black Sea - Aegean Sea and Balkans - by the attempt of a "Land Power" to acquire unhindered access to the warm seas to the South and the corresponding opposition of the Western Sea Powers to prevent this access. Russia, as the traditional land power, at the heart of the Eastern Question, views the Black Sea as the "gate towards world domination (hegemony)". Eurasianism offers a new dynamism with two faces to that traditional geopolitical perception:

1. Within the framework of a possible rapprochement between Russia and Iran, the Black Sea system runs the risk geopolitically of being withdrawn from the broader European area and constituting a unified subsystem with the Caspian area.
2. It tempts not only Iran but Germany as well, to re-evaluate the "Eastern Policy" in case new problems in the outer euro-eastern space are created after the American elections and the possible strengthening of "pro-isolation" American public opinion.

It seems clear that nowadays the eurasianism ideology promotes such a dynamic, which might be further consolidated by the use of the Eastern Question. Indeed it could eventually come to be supported by Putin who has committed Russia to a more assertive and more nationalist foreign policy. It is in the context of this decision that the Russian fleet has returned to the Mediterranean, where 10-15 years ago it was still sailing as "equal-to-equal" with the American Sixth Fleet. Russian naval intelligence gathering has also resumed with the despatch from the Black Sea of the spy-ship "Kildin" to the Mediterranean. Russia is preparing to station a significant naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean led by the carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov".

The return of the Russian fleet to the Southern Seas constitutes a part of the long drafted plan named "Global Ocean". President Putin has presented the Russian naval leadership with the task of returning to the "Global Ocean", where Russian economic and political interests are involved. According to Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov the presence of the Fleet in the Mediterranean has, among other purposes, the task of ensuring the unhindered activity of the Russian commercial fleet. Recent incidents such as the interception and detention of the Russian tanker "Volganef" by ships of the American fleet in the Persian Gulf, have clearly created a new attitude in the Russian naval and political leadership. The "Global Ocean" concept was discussed in the 1990s during the Presidency of Boris Yel'tsin. However it was never implemented.

The words of Sergey Rogov, director of the USA-Canada Institute, who is neither nostalgic of the past nor a political opponent to the Yel'tsin regime, are revealing: "The destructive politics of the Russian leadership (referring to Yel'tsin's eight-year term) resulted in the transformation of Russia from a superpower to a weak state ... and by that ... the emergence of an enormous asymmetry regarding the American-Russian relations ..." It is significant that these views are now expressed across the political spectrum. Those who mentioned them in the past risked being accused of being nostalgic for the communist era. However, now even serious analysts and enlightened democrats express them publicly.

The serious weakening of Russia can be seen as dangerous not only for her national interests, but also for the interests of many other smaller countries, among them, those belonging to the Mediterranean - Balkans - Black Sea area.

The “Admiral Kuznetsov” will be accompanied by two large anti-submarine ships. The appearance of the spy-ship “Kildin” has already troubled the Americans who had become used to a situation where they ‘played without an opponent’. It has reminded them that the Russians sometimes return, as they unexpectedly did in June 1999 when 270 Commandos took over the Pristina airport in Kosovo, triggering an international crisis and alarming the NATO leadership in Brussels.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Regarding the thought of H Mackinder, see I Loucas, Contemporary Political History and World Wars. English and German Theoricians of Power (in Greek), p99-107. On the conception of the Russian area as the “heartland” of the “World Island” see among others also M Hauner, What is Asia to us? Russia’s Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today, New York, 1990 and compare with Strategic Visions by A Ignatov, Geopolitische Theorien in Russland heute, Koeln, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> On the thought of K Haushofer, see I Loucas, op cit, p153-155.
- <sup>3</sup> Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series D (1937-1945), Vol 11: The War Years, Washington DC, US Government Printing Office 1960, p537.
- <sup>4</sup> See A Bullock, Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives, New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1992, p689.
- <sup>5</sup> See H Kissinger, Diplomacy (Greek translation), Athens, Livanis, 1995, p404-405.
- <sup>6</sup> On N Spykman, see I Loucas, op cit, p146.
- <sup>7</sup> See I Loucas, “La Question d’ Orient. Points de vue geopolitiques anciens et nouveaux”, Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporaines, No 192, 1998, p167-182 and compare with H W Weigert, Principles of Political Geography, New York, Appleton Century-Crofts, 1957, p224.
- <sup>8</sup> Ch Clover, “Dreams of the Eurasian Heartland”, Foreign Affairs, Vol 78, No 2, March-April 1999, p9.
- <sup>9</sup> See Ch Clover, op cit, p11.
- <sup>10</sup> See the presentation of Ch Clover, op cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Zb Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard (Greek translation), Athens, Livanis, 1998, p63.
- <sup>12</sup> Zb Brzezinski, op cit, p27.
- <sup>13</sup> I Loucas, “The New Geopolitics of the Balkans”, International Conference: Balkans Perspectives. Role of the European Union and Russia, Russia Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 26 November 1999 (records under publication).
- <sup>14</sup> See indicatively A Chauprade & Fr Thual, Dictionnaire de Geopolitique, Paris, Ellipses, 1998, p405-406.
- <sup>15</sup> See article mentioned above, note 8.

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