

The influence of continental and maritime powers on the structure of international politics

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Annotatsiya: The interplay between continental and maritime powers has historically defined the architecture of global politics. From the Peloponnesian War to the Cold War and the contemporary U.S.-China rivalry, the geographic orientation and strategic preferences of great powers - whether land-based or sea-based - have significantly influenced conflict dynamics, alliance patterns, global governance structures, and regional security orders. This paper explores the historical, theoretical, and practical dimensions of continental and maritime powers, analyzing their impact on international political structures across different eras. It argues that understanding the distinctions and interactions between these types of powers is essential for interpreting global strategic shifts and predicting future geopolitical developments.

Keywords: continental powers, maritime powers, geopolitics, international politics, great power rivalry, sea power, land power

Introduction. The structure of international politics has been shaped by the strategic competition between continental and maritime powers for centuries. These power types are not merely geographic distinctions but encompass divergent strategic cultures, military doctrines, economic systems, and international behaviors. This dichotomy - land versus sea - has become a central theme in classical and contemporary geopolitical thought.

This research aims to analyze how continental and maritime powers influence the structure of international politics, including their roles in conflict generation, alliance formation, economic systems, and governance mechanisms. It will delve into historical cases, theoretical underpinnings, and current international dynamics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

I. Theoretical Foundations: Geopolitics and Power Typologies

1.1 Classical Geopolitical Thought

Classical geopolitical theory offers the foundation for the distinction between maritime and continental powers. Scholars like Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Nicholas Spykman articulated strategic frameworks that remain relevant.

- Mahan's Sea Power Doctrine emphasized naval dominance and global commerce, asserting that maritime powers are more flexible, mobile, and oriented toward global outreach.

- Mackinder's Heartland Theory presented the world as a chessboard where control of the Eurasian Heartland ensures global dominance, favoring land-based empires.

- Spykman's Rimland Theory balanced these views, suggesting that control of the coastal areas around Eurasia (Rimland) was crucial.

1.2 Structural Realism and Power Projection

Structural realism underscores the anarchic international system where states strive for survival through power accumulation. Maritime powers, with their naval fleets and overseas bases, can project power globally, while continental powers dominate through regional land control and strategic depth.

II. Historical Context: Continental vs. Maritime Rivalries

2.1 Ancient and Classical Eras

The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) between Athens (a maritime democracy) and Sparta (a continental oligarchy) provides the earliest case of sea-land rivalry. Athens leveraged its naval supremacy for commerce and alliance, while Sparta relied on its land forces and alliances in the Peloponnesian League.

2.2 Early Modern Europe

The rise of European empires further demonstrates this division:

- Britain emerged as a global maritime hegemon, relying on naval dominance, trade, and colonial outreach.
- France and Russia, as continental powers, expanded through land warfare and continental alliances.

The Napoleonic Wars embodied this clash, with Britain forming coalitions and using its navy to contain Napoleon's land-based expansionism.

2.3 The 20th Century: World Wars and the Cold War

- World War I and II were global conflicts reflecting the collision of continental (Germany, Russia) and maritime powers (UK, USA).
- The Cold War further institutionalized the dichotomy: the United States, a maritime superpower, countered the USSR, a continental empire.

The maritime strategy of NATO relied on sea lines of communication and mobility, while the Warsaw Pact centered on contiguous territorial control.

III. Strategic Characteristics of Continental and Maritime Powers

3.1 Military Doctrines

- Continental Powers: emphasize large ground forces, strategic depth, and border defense. Their military-industrial complexes are land-oriented.
- Maritime Powers: prioritize naval power, air projection, and control of chokepoints (e.g., Suez Canal, Strait of Malacca).

3.2 Economic Models

- Maritime powers are generally open-market, trade-centric, and globalized.
- Continental powers may lean toward autarky, regional economic integration, and state control of strategic industries.

3.3 Political Institutions and Strategic Culture

- Maritime powers often develop liberal-democratic institutions due to trade networks and pluralism.
- Continental powers may evolve toward centralized authority structures focused on internal cohesion and border security.

IV. The Impact on International Political Structures

4.1 Alliance Patterns

Maritime powers, due to their global outreach, form network-based alliances like the British Empire or the U.S.-led NATO. Continental powers prefer regional compacts such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the CSTO.

4.2 Conflict Generation and Escalation

- Continental expansionism often leads to border conflicts and regional instability (e.g., Germany's eastward push or Russia's actions in Ukraine).
- Maritime containment strategies lead to naval blockades, sanctions, and distant proxy wars (e.g., U.S. in Vietnam or the South China Sea tensions).

4.3 Governance and Institutions

- Maritime powers typically advocate for rules-based international order, multilateralism, and maritime law (UNCLOS).

- Continental powers may challenge these norms, emphasizing sovereignty, multipolarity, and alternative institutions (e.g., SCO, BRICS).

V. Contemporary Geopolitical Landscape

5.1 U.S. vs. China: The New Sea-Land Rivalry

China's Belt and Road Initiative and its militarization of the South China Sea signal a continental power's pivot to maritime capabilities. Conversely, the U.S. reinforces its Indo-Pacific presence through AUKUS, QUAD, and naval patrols.

This dynamic challenges traditional alignments:

- China: combines land control with growing sea ambitions.
- U.S.: maintains its maritime supremacy but faces the challenge of sustaining global overreach.

5.2 Russia and Eurasian Continentalism

Russia, a classical continental power, employs hybrid warfare, energy politics, and regional alliances to reassert its influence in Eurasia. The annexation of Crimea and intervention in Syria signal attempts to access warm water routes and bypass maritime containment.

5.3 Middle Powers and Maritime-Continental Balancing

States like India, Turkey, and Iran navigate between land and sea strategies:

- India invests in its navy while managing land borders with China and Pakistan.
- Turkey revives maritime ambitions (Blue Homeland doctrine) alongside regional land interventions.

VI. The Future of International Politics: Hybridization or Polarization?

6.1 Hybrid Powers

The strict sea-land dichotomy is blurring. Technological advancements (airpower, cyber warfare, satellites) and globalization reduce the geographical constraints of traditional powers.

- China's "two-ocean" strategy and Russia's Arctic naval expansion show convergence.
- The U.S. and allies integrate land, air, sea, and space operations through joint commands.

6.2 Global Multipolarity and New Geopolitical Axes

The emerging multipolar world complicates binary divisions:

- BRICS and SCO challenge Western maritime hegemony.
- AI, economic corridors, and digital platforms add new dimensions to geopolitical rivalry beyond geography.

VII. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

7.1 Maritime Powers

- Invest in naval innovation, cyber-sea capabilities, and control of global supply chains.
- Strengthen multilateral maritime governance frameworks.

7.2 Continental Powers

- Enhance overland connectivity, regional integration, and energy corridors.
- Develop maritime capabilities without triggering full-scale confrontation.

7.3 For Neutral and Middle Powers

- Pursue flexible alignment strategies.
- Leverage geography for economic gain (e.g., Central Asia as a transit hub).

Conclusion. The tension between continental and maritime powers continues to shape the international political landscape. While the binary division is increasingly complex due to globalization and hybrid threats, understanding these foundational geopolitical logics remains vital. The evolution of power structures - from empires to alliances, and now to networks - reflects the

enduring influence of geography on politics. Future international order will likely depend on how effectively these power types adapt, cooperate, or clash in the face of shared global challenges.

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