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Wesley J. Reisser ^a

^a Department of Geography, University of California at Los Angeles, CA, USA

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

A New Tri-Polar World Order?

WESLEY J. REISSER

Department of Geography, University of California at Los Angeles, CA, USA

Parag Khanna (2008), *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York: Random House, 496 pages. ISBN 978-1400065089 (Hbk. \$29).

Since the end of the Cold War, political scientists and geographers have been grasping for new ways to characterise the international system. Grand geopolitical visions of earlier eras, such as the bipolar world system of the Cold War, often drove great power policies and created the basic frameworks through which statesmen shaped policies throughout the world. The clear demise of the bipolar world has led to countless attempts to re-vision the world system.¹ Earlier attempts, such as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*², Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*³ and Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*⁴ have been widely criticised and have not been widely adopted in the same way that bipolarity was accepted during the Cold War or balance of power politics in the pre-World War I era. Parag Khanna attempts to provide a new framework in his geopolitical polemic, *The Second World*. Khanna attempts to frame the post-Cold War world in a very different way than his predecessors, while at the same time borrowing from some of their arguments in what proves to be a much more complex geopolitical world order than that assumed by other classical geopolitical writers of recent note.

In many ways, *The Second World* borrows heavily from earlier geopolitical tropes in the imagined world system that it presents. It fits in a similar vein with some other geopolitical writers of this era, such as John Mearshimer in *Back to the Future*⁵ and Charles Kupchan in *The End of the American Era*⁶, in that Khanna's most basic world vision is that of a multi-polar world, as also argued by these other authors. However, his multi-polar world is a different

Address correspondence to Wesley J. Reisser, Department of Geography, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA. E-mail: reisser@ucla.edu

one, a tri-polar world of the United States, the European Union and China. This differs from either Mearshimer (who argued that Europe would remain fragmented and the home to several power centres) or Kupchan (who argued for a multi-polar world that includes Khanna's three powers plus Japan and Russia). But what truly separates this world vision from previous ones is the role played by the so-called second world. This is not the second world as known during the Cold War, consisting of the Eastern Bloc communist states. Instead, this second world consists of those states that lie somewhere between the haves of the first or developed world, and those states that he considers the third world, ones that are not developing or are developing too slowly to play a major role in international politics. This new second world is the arena where the three world powers will supposedly vie for influence and compete, rather than directly competing with each other as great powers did in previous eras.⁷ This competition will be mostly economic rather than military in practice, thus making for a very different world system than that modeled by other geopoliticians.

The Second World also fits within the broader literature that espouses the regional approach to the study of international relations. Rather than focusing on the three major powers, the book is structured more around broad macro-regions that these powers will compete for influence within. Although Khanna refers to the second world, he analyses this bloc of states as five separate macro-regions: Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East/North Africa, and East/Southeast Asia. These regions allow for organisation within the work and conform with many established world regional divisions, most oft seen in textbooks for World Regional Geography or state-based geographical reference books. However, they are problematic in this case (as in the others), in that he approaches regions by looking only at states that he has lumped into his second world category, along with a few other clearly third world states (like Afghanistan) that have also made their way into the book, despite its stated goal. His regional approach also falls into the territorial trap of analysing specific states, one at a time, rather than approaching these regions as an interconnected part of a globalising world.⁸

The book begins by introducing the reader to the second world as a concept and laying out the tri-polar structure of the world in a basic form. This includes a discussion of "inter imperial relations" (p. xiii), thus characterising the international scene as still rooted in an imperial structure, although one of economic dominance, not just military dominance or direct control. It shifts very quickly into a detailed analysis of each state or group of states that are central to the second world construct. The first group of such states to receive attention are "The West's East," discussed in Part 1 of the book. This group of states consists of the former-Eastern Bloc states that are still outside the European Union (EU), but most certainly in its backyard. Russia dominates the content of this section, although outside energy, the

role it will play remains unclear in the discussion. Ukraine is modelled as a bridge state between Russia and the EU and is also central to the narrative presented for the region. Within the Balkans, Khanna focuses on Serbia and Bosnia, the two states furthest from EU membership in the area, although he certainly moves the Balkans to a more peripheral role in world politics than what it enjoyed prior to World War I or in the 1990s. Turkey and the Caucasus round out this region for Khanna as states that are both bound to Europe and connect it to the broader Eurasian landmass far beyond the borders of the EU. *The Second World* argues that the EU is transforming this region by binding it to social and political norms that will move it slowly into the EU orbit, that is if the EU leadership does not step aside from this task (p. 60).

Moving beyond Europe's periphery, *The Second World* next tackles Central Asia in Part 2, "The Affairs of the Heartland." This section's title refers to one of classical geopolitics' most influential early works, Sir Halford MacKinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History*.⁹ In fact, the importance of this region in contemporary politics is tied by Khanna very closely to MacKinder's arguments, that whomever controls the heartland will dominate the world island (Eurasia). Unlike Eastern Europe, this region is being courted by all three powers and for Khanna will be a key region of geopolitical rivalry between his three poles, mainly because of the resources like oil that are prevalent in the area. The US and EU are seen as working together in the region, especially due to the Afghanistan NATO mission, while China also is courting Central Asian governments in an attempt to gain resources for its growing economy. China's provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang are discussed, along with the five former-Soviet Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and the southern peripheral states of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although all three powers are working in this region, Khanna believes that China is prevailing currently in its quest for a strong position in Central Asia, while the US and EU have goals that will be difficult to balance with the political climate in this region (p. 115).

Shifting hemispheres, *The Second World* next tackles Latin America in Part 3, "The End of the Monroe Doctrine." Long considered by geopoliticians the backyard of the US, Khanna argues that this region will face increasing attention from his other centres of power in the coming years. It is globalisation that is moving this region out of the American orbit, by allowing goods to flow quickly to Chinese and European markets (p. 121). Not all of Latin America is placed within his second world construct. Rather, it is a small group of Latin American states that receive all the attention of this work, namely Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Chile. Together, this disparate group of states stand out as the keys to Latin America for the three poles to compete over. Although Mexico and Colombia are viewed as strongly within the American orbit, the other states of Latin America covered are regarded as important places where China and

the EU will try to gain traction vis-à-vis the US in the new economic imperialism of the twenty-first century.

Part 4, "In Search of the 'Middle East'," tackles the geopolitical hotspot region that gains more attention than any other today, the Middle East including North Africa. This region is referred to as "The Shattered Belt," referring to Saul Cohen's shatter belt, although Cohen was referring to a much broader arc of states than just those in this section.¹⁰ The sharp divisions, political polarisation and conflicts that wrack this region lead to a characterisation of it being a shattered region. However, it is also one that is for Khanna one of the most contested between the major powers. Khanna places some states, such as those of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) mainly in the EU camp, with others like Israel and Saudi Arabia closest to the US and Iran to China. Despite these examples, on the whole the region is portrayed as one where long-time American and European interests are coming face to face with a rising China hungry for Middle Eastern oil and for markets in the consumer driven economies of the Gulf states (p. 253). This region is viewed as the second most important in the second world, in terms of the intense attention and competition it will receive in future geopolitical tussles.

The final section of the book, "Asia for Asians," focuses on rising China and the states in its immediate neighbourhood, especially those of Southeast Asia. *The Second World* presents the shift in East Asia from one of "outside in to inside out" (p. 257). This shift from Chinese domination (as seen in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century great power infiltration) to one of Chinese expansion is central to the narrative presented on this region. However, Khanna argues that American foreign policy remains committed to Nicolas Spykman's Rimland theory, making this region especially important as a key to continued American geopolitical power (p. 260).¹¹ It is states like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia that get the majority of attention as places that will be at the centre of geopolitical focus between the new great powers, especially the US and China. Allusions are drawn to the Japanese Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere of the 1930s in how China is analysed now. Khanna concludes by providing what he views as the principal means each of the three poles will take in competing over his second world. The United States will focus on maintaining military dominance and pushing its vision of democracy and development on the world (p. 322). The Chinese are expected to push economic expansion as their mode of influence in the second world, while the EU will try to bind more of this bloc into its orbit through international agreements and the extension of European norms on governance and human rights outside its own member states (p. 335). It is this three-sided approach that remains the central argument of *The Second World*.

The Second World attempts to provide a global geopolitical framework, a goal that is achieved in part. However, the work is more invested in

providing rudimentary political and historical analysis of the variety of places it tries to describe. For those raised with the second world meaning the communist bloc centred around the Soviet Union, it is difficult to even conceive of this term meaning something entirely different, which proves to be a constant stumbling block while navigating the book. The five sections of the book focus mainly on describing the specific states placed within the new second world framework. The reasons for their inclusion and the exclusion of other states is not fully addressed. Certain states that make the list are quite surprising, such as Afghanistan and Burma, while other places one would expect to receive treatment, like Taiwan, are strangely missing. The second world approach also fails to analyse major players in the international system that are neither of the second world or a great power in this world order. This leaves developed countries like Japan, Canada and Australia completely out of the book. Furthermore, major states that are relegated to the third world are left out, including major regional powers in Africa like Nigeria and South Africa. Even India only merits a couple page discussion in the book, despite its enormous population and fast growing economy.

Beyond the issues of whom is left in or out of the discussion, very little is offered to justify why the US, EU and China are fast becoming the three poles of a new international system. Without questioning this sort of rubric, as theorists of critical geopolitics would, even the fan of classical geopolitical thought is left with a less than satisfactory explanation as to why these are the powers to be. Most scholars need very little justification to include the US, which under most geopolitical models remains important due to its enormous economic and military strength relative to other states. However, debates regarding China's and the EU's roles in the international system remain mixed. Khanna clearly sides with scholars such as T. R. Reid, author of *The United States of Europe*, arguing that the EU will become a major power in the world system.¹² Other scholars point to the lack of a European Foreign Minister with actual policy-making powers and the continued influence of several European states' foreign ministries as examples to counter this point. Whether China will rise also remains a major question. China has unquestionably become one of the main players in a more globalised world, but much that is being said of China today was said of Japan in the 1980s. Whether China, with hundreds of millions of impoverished citizens, will be able to flex its geopolitical muscles in the same way as developed states remains to be seen.

Despite these shortfalls, there is much to be said in favour of *The Second World* as well. Unlike most other geopolitical polemics of recent note, *The Second World* makes use of many important geographical works of earlier eras in ways rarely seen today. Works by both modern and historical figures from the geographical side of geopolitical scholarship were highly influential on many arguments made within the work. In the introductory

portion of the book, where Khanna explores earlier geopolitical writing, he focuses on not just the work of noteworthy political scientists, but also geographers and historians of the field. This interdisciplinary approach, one that acknowledges the critiques of globalisation theorists and critical geopolitics, is long overdue in classical geopolitical scholarship.

Many commentators are describing this work as one comparable to *The End of History* or *Clash of Civilizations*. Although *The Second World* does imagine a general geopolitical framework like these works, it creates a global framework focused in a very different direction. The work does not focus on hard power conflict between states, but rather on other ways in which power centres will compete. Although not ruling out a direct conflict between the US and China (as many recent works suggest), *The Second World* suggests that great power competition in a globalised world will be carried out through economic deal making, new treaty frameworks and the exportation of norms from the centres of power into the rest of the world. Although described as empires, these power centres are nothing like Hardt and Negri's *Empire*¹³ or the colonial empires of old. If *The Second World* does act in a similar manner to the works it is compared with, it will be in the lively debate that it will spark. Although it is unlikely that this work will be adopted wholesale by the policy establishment, much like George Kennan's *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*¹⁴ informed the policy strategies of Cold War policy makers and geopolitical writers, *The Second World* does provide an intriguing rubric through which to better inform our understanding of international relations in a globalising world.

NOTES

1. For a critique of these methods and analysis of previous eras geopolitical models, see J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics* (London: Routledge 2003).
2. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press 1992).
3. S. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (Summer 1993) pp. 22–49.
4. T. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2005).
5. J. Mearshimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security* 15/1 (Summer 1990) pp. 5–56.
6. C. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Knopf 2002).
7. See P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House 1987).
8. See J. Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1/1 (Spring 1994).
9. H. MacKinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *Geographical Journal* 23/4 (April 1904).
10. S. Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World* (New York: Random House 1963).
11. The Rimland Theory was first presented in N. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1942).
12. T. R. Reid, *The United States of Europe* (New York: Penguin 2004).
13. See M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 2000).
14. G. Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs* 25/4 (1947).