

# The **IMTe™** Reports

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## **Sea versus Continental Powers** **The Quest for World Dominance**

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## Sea versus Continental Powers The Quest for World Dominance

*He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight*  
Sun Tzu

For centuries, global sea powers controlling the oceans of the world had the upper hand over continental rivals, dictating the terms of economic activity and the rules of international trade. Control of the North Atlantic in the 19th and 20th centuries helped the United States and Britain to coordinate and jointly implement policies through the major European wars of the time. During both World Wars and the Cold War, uninterrupted communication from the US East Coast to Western Europe became the foundation of NATO's strength and the basis for the projection of America's presence on the European Continent. Most major historical turning points in world history were determined on the seas. Today, the large Eurasian continent possesses all the elements for unprecedented economic, communication, and transportation activity, as well as the projection of military power, over very long distances. Efficient, largely uninterrupted internal communication lines throughout the Eurasian landmass would constitute a strategic advantage over the less coherent, more dispersed external communication lines of US naval power, still the world's leading *sea power* and the dominant maritime force controlling the world's oceans around Eurasia. The *Eurasian heartland*, inaccessible to the projection of naval power, remains largely immune to maritime military authority.

China is implementing its grandiose expansion plan, specifically, the consolidation of the vast Eurasian landmasses via its *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). Russia, in line with its historical geostrategic dogma, is endeavoring to secure strategic depth westwards, on its European front as well as in the Caucasus region. Moscow, via several political initiatives, is seeking to build up the Eurasian Economic Union, a grand visionary project of long-term geopolitical scope aiming to include under its wings all of Asia and partially further expand into the north-eastern Middle East region. Thus, China and Russia, on the basis of their growing economic and military cooperation, could in effect unite the whole of Eurasia including Europe under a flexible structure, with large conglomerations of nations retaining their independent policies but sharing a common global vision, a massive continent stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific shores. At the same time, both Russia and China, *great land powers*, are infiltrating the ocean space by building strong naval forces both to protect their vital supply and trade lines but also to project additional power in the vast ocean space, creating a massive challenge to the US's global hegemonic position.

China's economy, infrastructure, technological base, and military structures are all interrelated, integrated, and directed towards the building of a 21st century imperial nation, an ideal replete with symbolism and sentiment and one that China's population fully embraces. China is implementing its Eurasian expansion project and its global hegemonic vision via its BRI program, with highways and rail, air, port, and communication lines as well as data flows as the fundamental constituent elements of expansion. China shrank when in the past it destroyed its sea force: today, it is again opening to the sea, a huge undertaking of immense geostrategic significance. Though clearly a *continental power*, China is implementing a new maritime dogma based on the development of a huge ultramodern naval force to challenge the US on the open oceans for the control of vital energy and trade lifelines. The dynamically evolving confrontation between China and the US cannot be placed in a clear historical context; its potential

outcome is also unclear at this stage but is probably one of the most significant factors in the shaping of a new world.

Russia exerts a strategy of preservation and solidification in geographical areas where historically it already maintained a presence, influence, or even control, whether in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East/Africa. In the European theater of operations, Ukraine and Belarus are the outermost areas on a geographical axis westward, where Russia could create unparalleled strategic military depth: thus, this region should be viewed as a vast border of shifting geopolitical currents between Europe and Russia. Putin's current foreign policy is not a superficial, random approach but rests on a strong ideological foundation, namely, the revival of a grand historical cycle of Russian strategic foreign policy and is contingent upon the way Russia intends to position itself in Eurasia.

The status of Europe today appears rather weak, divided, and uncertain. This will probably change, although alternative directions currently comprise a very complicated mosaic of potential outcomes, unpredictable at present and therefore difficult to analyze. What is needed in Europe and the EU is more openness in democratic processes and less authoritarianism, the latter presently appearing as an all too real, dark, dystopic, potential future for parts of the European continent. Despite fierce US resistance, the direction for the future of Europe is firmly pointing eastward towards Russia and the vast Eurasian landmasses. Militarily, Europe will beyond any doubt grow continuously stronger. Germany may in the end opt to take a firm stand and convince its population of the necessity for the military nuclear option. The emergence of a fourth European power bloc next to the US, China, and Russia is unlikely at least until late or beyond the current decade and potentially realizable after a new global balance of power and a new worldwide sociopolitical and economic order has emerged. Until then, Europe will predominantly employ diplomacy along with economic and other soft power tools, and only where necessary, utilize military means in addressing its objectives within the complexities of contemporary times.

A truly unified Eurasian continent is a direct threat to the global leadership status of the United States, the still dominant world power. In the battle of *continental versus ocean powers* for world dominance, other substantial regional players have already taken their positions within one or the other camp. The United States will always view, this being part of its permanent geostrategic dogma, the emergence of a dominant power in Eurasia, whether that is China or Russia, uniting the Eurasian landmasses as a strategic threat to the US's hegemonic global position. After WWII and until recently, the US has been setting up global rules of governance, with massive influence being exerted over the division of labor, in production, pricing, value chains and services, dominant transaction currency, the direction and objectives of investment, market regulation, technological cycles, and new scientific breakthroughs. This has been dramatically changing over time, gradually at first, then at an accelerated pace during the past 20 years, with the spectacular rise of China challenging the US on all fronts and as regards its global leadership role. The UK, Australia, and Japan are all aligned within the *ocean power bloc*. Russia and China are *great land powers* controlling vast areas of land and resources. Europe, excluding the UK and the Hellenic Republic, largely belongs to the *continental power bloc*. Nevertheless, advanced military technology increasingly allows both *land* and *sea powers* to infiltrate *space*. *Space*, as the ultimate human frontier surrounding the earth, is becoming a place of increased technological and military competition for all leading world powers, out of which core *communication, command, and control* nodes are increasingly operating.

The US faces a formidable dual global challenge today: first, the prospect of a united Eurasian landmass, with Russia, China, and Europe in leading cooperative roles; second, China pushing on all levels, political, economic, social, and military for global dominance. Both challenges carry the inherent potential to dethrone the US from its leading role in the world. The US will thus do anything in its power to avert the development of a massive Eurasian landmass stretching from the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific. It has been using soft power and diplomacy to constantly accentuate areas of potential friction between Europe and Russia or help create new ones. Recent examples include the tension arising on the Polish-Belarusian borders, ongoing sanctions aiming for the cancellation of Nord Stream II (a grand project bringing Russia and Europe closer), and the recent tensions with Russia related to Ukraine. NATO, to a great extent a US foreign policy/military arm, will continue to provoke Russia by moving with its structures and military means ever closer to Russia's borders, with the goal of undermining *the Russian strategic defensive dogma of essential buffer zone depth* on its western borders nearest to Europe. The Western media, as a standard practice, portray any reaction by Russia as an act of aggression towards Europe, which, in our view, is simply non-existent. In fact, it is Russia which has historically been invaded by European forces several times in the past and on a massive scale. Another such provocative stratagem is the US nuclear weapon-sharing program, with several US nuclear heads stationed in selected European countries namely, Germany, and possibly Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey and, in the future, probably Poland, partially integrated into their host nations' military structures but under strict US control. American nuclear weapons in Europe do protect the continent but actually mainly serve US global geostrategic interests, indirectly preserving the friction between Europe and Russia, and discouraging the formation of a European army, while keeping Europe under the US security umbrella and isolated from any permanent bonding with Russia/Eurasia.

In the European south, Greece, will remain an undisputed and uncontested global leader in shipping - being as she is *a great ocean power* with an important say in *the geopolitics of the world's oceans*. As the battle between the *ocean* and *sea powers* intensifies, Greece could well politically detach itself - partially or completely - from the EU and join the *Atlantic alliance of nations*. For this to happen, the Hellenic Republic will need a visionary but also pragmatic political leader and uncontested long-term US guarantees for the integrity of its national borders against external aggression/intrusion, plus substantial American support for Greece's leading industrial sectors, as well as for its energy, tourism, and high-tech industries. Hellenic shipping will continue to propagate a legendary historical identity worldwide while being the global carrier of such intangible values as ideology and symbolism, culture, history, and belief.

At this point in our analysis, a closing geopolitical and geostrategic view is warranted on the events unfolding between the West, Ukraine, and Russia. *As concerns Ukraine, the West is crossing a red line and disregarding legitimate Russian national security concerns*. President Vladimir Putin has declared that if the West deploys missiles in Ukraine that could reach Moscow in less than 10 minutes, Russia will counter such moves by deploying hypersonic missiles (travelling at Mach 9 speed), with the potential capacity to reach Western centers in 5 minutes. Putin's words have to be taken seriously as Moscow will not allow NATO to destroy its *buffer zone defense dogma* on its western borders. The Russian *defensive* position is simple, straightforward, and clear. Russia has lately amassed considerable forces along the Ukrainian border, possibly not yet enough to occupy the whole of Ukraine but certainly sufficient to physically control key areas of the country. In the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US would most likely avoid war but would respond with harsh sanctions on Russia and

military/financial assistance to Ukraine. It will therefore only win *the war of perceptions* and temporarily achieve its aim of undermining any European-Russian rapprochement. American direct military air and missile intervention in Ukraine would be a highly dangerous act translating into outright war with Russia: we, however, see such a scenario as highly improbable. Although a potential Russian invasion would most likely result in the occupation of parts of the Ukraine in the east and the north, we cannot exclude the more remote long-term possibility of Russia aiming to occupy all of Ukraine.

Historical and cultural parameters should not be ignored regarding the issue of Ukraine. Russians, Ukrainians, as well as Belarusians are all descendants of the Ancient Rus, once the largest state in Europe, bound together by one original language (i.e., Old East Slavic), strong economic ties, and a common Eastern Orthodox Christian faith, the latter emanating from the Eastern Orthodox Roman (Byzantine) Empire. St. Vladimir, the Prince of Novgorod, Grand Prince of Kiev and ruler of Kievan Rus', will always be seen as the great spiritual father of Russia creating the strong line of affinity with Ukraine. Modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era, shaped, to a significant extent, on the lands of historical Russia. Ukraine and Russia have, in fact, developed as a single economic system over the centuries as natural complementary economic partners. Today, Russia is still one of Ukraine's top three trading partners. The US and (in support) the EU have since 2014 systematically and consistently lobbied for Ukraine to limit economic cooperation with Russia, with a certain degree of success. The true sovereignty of Ukraine should be interpreted on the basis of religious, demographic, economic, and civilizational ties formed for centuries between Ukraine and Russia. Russia will, in our humble view, simply not allow distorted western perceptions i) of its historical territories, and ii) of the existence of a significant percentage of pro-Russian Ukrainians, to be used to the detriment of Russia. We strongly question the simplistic approach adopted by western centers of strategic analysis interpreting current Russian military mobilization across the Ukrainian borders as a bluff. President Putin is, in our view, not bluffing: his words are decidedly shrewd and measured and should be taken seriously.

During a period marked by an unprecedented global health crisis, *largely, a crisis characterized by questionable political decisions*, with the entire world still apparently stunned and overcome by fear and shock, strong geopolitical and geostrategic currents continue their sweeping course towards their final resolution. With the current coronavirus epidemic acting as a catalyst, the entire global political, demographic, social, and health fabric of the world is in the process of being aggressively reshaped. A major sociopolitical crisis of a magnitude not seen since the end of WWII may erupt at any time, which could well create additional volatility and lead to a global shakeout of political, social, institutional, and health establishments. These potential events, although not directly related to the relentlessly advancing geopolitical and geostrategic waves, would, beyond doubt, create synergistic effects and accentuate and magnify a number of looming global crisis situations. This should be a time of caution, with safety measures prudently taken in every business decision and hedging and insurance incorporated in all investment strategies.

*Everyone wants peace, but doesn't know how to achieve it ... He who acts to serve his own self-interests will never find peace ...*

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