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Eurasia, validity of a geopolitical concept

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Abstract:

Eurasia, as a geographical area and geopolitical concept, was defined at the beginning of the 20th century, and after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, it was re-evaluated from the perspective of a unipolar power and its challenges.

With the advancement of the 21st century, globalization, and conflicts affecting different parts of the world, the scope of the concept of Eurasia, as a goal to reach itself as the world dominant power, seems to be fully in force and as driving force behind the confrontation between players vying for that title.

Keywords:

Eurasia, Powers, Conflicts, Geopolitics.

* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Opinion Papers** are the responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

“Regularly, we associate the Modern Era with the height of American power. In reality, we have been living through a long and violent Eurasian century. Since the early 20th century, Eurasia has been the centre of global rivalries”.

Hal Brands, “The Eurasian Century”, 2025

Thesis: Does Eurasia exist?

The last five years have witnessed the resurgence of conflicts on a global scale, with characteristics and magnitude reminiscent of the past. The “Special Military Operation,” the term used by Russia to designate the large-scale deployment of military forces into Ukrainian territory, has marked the reappearance of a specter once thought never to return to European soil. It has forced all the major powers of the Old Continent to reconsider their strategic outlook.

The Middle East has not lagged behind. Although Israel's friction with extremist Muslim groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah has been a constant throughout the current century, the scope of the declared “war” against Hamas, as a reaction to the treacherous attack on Israeli communities on October 7, 2023, has escalated, leading to direct involvement by Iran at various stages. This includes the missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attack on October 1, 2024, as well as actions by groups as distant as the Houthis from Yemen, who sought to impact not only Israeli assets but also maritime traffic through the Red Sea.

More recently, a new escalation of military actions in the disputed region of Kashmir between India and Pakistan has raised alarms over tensions between two countries with nuclear capabilities, something that, in the eyes of the international community, is always a cause for concern due to the uncertainty surrounding the potential use of such weapons, even at a tactical level.

From a geostrategic perspective, the West has shifted its focus toward the Indo-Pacific, driven by the economic interests posed by the giants of East Asia, not only because of the potential represented by their domestic markets, but also because, through their development and human capital, they challenge the military capabilities of the United States and the West in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, specifically, India and China, respectively.

This article, using the case study methodology, seeks to propose the continued relevance of Eurasia as a concept and geopolitical objective for the great powers—whether in pursuit of its conquest (control) or its defence, depending on their geographic location and, therefore, their national interests and political objectives.

History evolves, but geography remains

At the beginning of the 20th century, English geographer and geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder introduced and defined the concept of the Heartland, or Centre of the World, when referring to Eurasia from a geopolitical perspective. He expressed the thesis: “Who rules the Heartland (Eurasia) commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world”¹.

The 20th century itself was marked by two great world wars, of which the second, in particular, replicating what Napoleon did in 1812, saw Hitler’s German forces undertake the so-called “Operation Barbarossa” in an attempt to conquer Bolshevik Russia and its riches. Like the French invasion at the beginning of the 19th century, Hitler’s venture was unsuccessful, marking the beginning of the fall of the Third Reich².

What followed World War II was the so-called Cold War between the West, led by the United States of America, and the bloc led by Russia along with the nations united under the control of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). The balance in this confrontation was defined by the development of nuclear arsenals by these two blocs, establishing, on the part of the United States of America (U.S.A.), a nuclear deterrence strategy as defined by U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara in a 1967 speech³. Thus, both powers faced each other with the potential capacity to use these new weapons, the cost of which, over time, eroded the economic capacity of the Soviet regime until its collapse.

The collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 led to the emergence of 15 new independent states, namely: in the Baltics, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; around Central Europe, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine; in the Caucasus mountains, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia; in

¹ Mackinder, H. (1904). The Geographical Pivot of History. *Geographical Journal*.

² Van Creveld, M. (2004). *Supplying War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ *McNamara Speech on U.S. Nuclear Strategy*. (1968). Source: CQ Press: <https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal67-1313223>

Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; and Russia itself ⁴.

When looking at this supercontinent, one cannot fail to mention and highlight the two most populous countries in the world: India and China ⁵.

At the end of the 20th century, American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski stated, “The power that dominates Eurasia will exert decisive influence over two-thirds of the world’s most economically productive regions” ⁶. This reality leads Brzezinski to propose the existence of first-order countries, “geostrategic players”, due to their capacity and will to influence beyond their borders. On the other hand, there are those countries that, primarily because of their geographic location, acquire relevance since their relationships with one or another first-order actor can imply shifts in the balance of power at the geopolitical level. These hinge countries were defined by Brzezinski as “geopolitical pivots.” At the end of the 20th century, the role of geostrategic players was held by countries such as the U.S.A., China, India, France, and Germany; meanwhile, the geopolitical pivots included Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Turkey, and Iran ⁷. In the view of the time, Russia was not considered among these first-order actors, probably because the reconfiguration of nations following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. was not yet clearly visible; however, it clearly should be included in that group. Likewise, today, it is probable that not all of these nations continue to maintain the player roles Brzezinski assigned them at the time, but it is more likely that the pivots still play their role given their geography-related characteristics.

From a geographical perspective, Eurasia combines two continents of the ancient world, Europe and Asia. It is bordered by the North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the Arctic Ocean, structuring Mackinder’s aforementioned “World-Island.” This insular geographic space contains one-third of the world’s landmass. Nearly 66% of the global population lives within it ⁸.

⁴ Hancock, K., & Libman, A. (2016). Eurasia. En T. Börzel, & T. Risse, *Comparative Regionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ *World Population Review*. (2025). Source: Current World Population: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>

⁶ Brzezinski, Z. (1997). A Geostrategy for Eurasia. *Foreign Affairs*.

⁷ Brzezinski, Z. (1998). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books.

⁸ Galan, S. (27 March 2025). Source: *Statista*. Distribution of the global population, by continent: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/237584/distribution-of-the-world-population-by-continent/>

From an economic perspective, Eurasia accounts for 61% of the world's GDP and also contains vast reserves of mineral resources of all kinds.

Globalization and Conflicts

In attempting to approximate an analysis of today's global reality, particularly from the standpoint of conflict, it is first necessary to establish a shared understanding of what is meant by "conflict."

From the simplest perspective, and relying on dictionary definitions, the term conflict, derived from the Latin "*conflictus*", is defined as the opposition between individuals or things. This concept may be extended to include groups of people or even entire nations.

In this broader and more comprehensive view, when confrontations involve violence and the use of weapons, International Humanitarian Law—or the Law of Armed Conflicts—distinguishes between two types: those involving belligerent parties within a single state (non-international armed conflicts) and those involving the armed forces of two or more states (international armed conflicts) ⁹.

The 21st century, as a result of interconnection and links associated with globalization, has made conflicts (crises or wars) more difficult to distinguish and delimit, as well as more limited in scope. According to the definitions presented in previous paragraphs, conflict inherently involves incompatible interests between the contending parties; however, in our times, with increased relations among countries, and thus their interests, it is less likely that this level of incompatibility will be reached. This is why, today, asymmetric conflicts have revealed the existence of a zone of ambiguity known as the Gray Zone, a space where the behaviour of the parties is not precisely peaceful, with friction and aggressiveness in actions distinguishing it from ordinary reality ¹⁰.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the world accentuated and revealed a reality that had been unfolding since the late 20th century with China's emergence on the global stage as an economic power. China became the primary source of supply for

⁹ Vité, S. (2009). Typology of armed conflicts in International Humanitarian Law. *International Review of the Red Cross*.

¹⁰ Aznar, F. (2024). Geopolítica y Guerra. En F. Aznar, *La Guerra. Teoría para comprender los conflictos del siglo XXI*. Madrid: El Viejo Topo.

the world's leading economies up to that point, exposing the interdependence among different economies worldwide, linking everything from basic supply providers to advanced technology producers, and revealing the fragility that this dependence or connection had created over time. This system broke down when measures had to be adopted to curb the virus's spread. A globalist world had failed to recognize the difference between multilateralism and national interests ¹¹. As a consequence, many countries had to reactivate their productive apparatuses to avoid that dependence, redirecting their economies toward more autarkic systems, which has led to the proposition of a new stage known as Globalization 2.0. This new reality—which in practice is not entirely new but saw the pandemic as an interface between the old and the new—has involved increased rivalry among the great powers, polarization, and political divisions. Ultimately, it is a fragmented world with a rupture in many of the relationships established in the previous stage ¹².

Eurasia: Geopolitical Coincidence or Historical Destiny?

Looking at the situation of ongoing conflicts worldwide in 2025, various organizations dedicated to their observation and monitoring, such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the International Crisis Group, have identified the main conflicts to follow this year as those in Syria, Ukraine/Russia, Sudan, the Sahel, the African Great Lakes region, Israel/Iran, Haiti, Mexico, Myanmar (Burma), Colombia, the Korean Peninsula, Pakistan/India, and China/USA.

Of the conflicts mentioned above, more than half occur in Eurasia, and among these, according to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) criteria, all are classified as “international armed conflicts.”

On the other hand, with a more thorough look at these international conflicts, we can recognize the direct or indirect involvement of the U.S.A. in them, clashing with other actors who are in some way challenging or outright confronting the supremacy this

¹¹ Atkinson, R., & Ezell, S. (24 March 2025). *Information Technology & Innovation Foundation*. Source: Toward Globalization 2.0: A New Trade Policy Framework and Advanced Industry Leadership and National Power: <https://itif.org/publications/2025/03/24/globalization2-a-new-trade-policy-framework/>

¹² Bosoer, F., & Turzi, M. (2020). La pandemia del 2020 en el debate de las Relaciones Internacionales. *Geopolítica*, 153-163.

country achieved in the 20th century and has at least had questioned in the 21st century so far.

Thus, in the war between Russia and Ukraine, the U.S. has been the country that has contributed and supported Ukraine the most—militarily, financially, and through humanitarian aid—providing nearly double the total aid, of all kinds, given by the rest of the world combined as of December 31, 2024, with a total of \$119.2 billion¹³. In this way, the U.S. participates indirectly in the course of the conflict. More recently, with the return of President Donald Trump for a second term in the White House, his interventions in the diplomatic arena have applied pressure toward a resolution of the conflict, moving away from a previous mediator stance to assume a negotiating position with Russia. This has had an impact not only on the potential outcomes of the war but has also generated effects, still difficult to determine, with European nations and with Ukraine itself, which until now has received significant support.

The signing of the trade agreement between the U.S.A. and Ukraine at the end of April this year, concerning the exploitation of rare earth minerals, could be interpreted as a way for Ukraine to repay the aid received during the conflict. However, the presence of direct U.S. commercial interests now on Ukrainian soil shifts the line of its future involvement in any action that might threaten Ukraine's status as a sovereign and independent state near Russia's borders. This situation suggests that, regardless of the outcome of the ongoing war, Ukraine will continue to play a role as a "geopolitical pivot."

Although Turkey has not been directly involved in active conflicts, it has played a key role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict as a guarantor and controller of access to the Black Sea, in accordance with the Montreux Convention¹⁴. In addition to its privileged geographic location, recognized since the times of the Roman Empire, Turkey has successfully positioned itself as an actor capable of navigating in the West as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while simultaneously maintaining strong ties with Russia, particularly in commercial, energy, and military cooperation sectors.

¹³ Buchholz, K. (14 February 2025). *The Countries Sending the Most Aid to Ukraine*. Source: Statista: <https://www.statista.com/chart/28489/ukrainian-military-humanitarian-and-financial-aid-donors/>

¹⁴ Conte de los Ríos, A. (03 March 2022). *La Convención de Montreux y la guerra de Ucrania*. Source: Global Strategy: <https://global-strategy.org/la-convencion-de-montreux-y-la-guerra-de-ucrania/>

This dual positioning has contributed to Turkey's continued exclusion from membership in the European Union (EU), despite being part of NATO, and has led to periodic tensions with the United States. Given all the factors mentioned above, Turkey is, by definition, a "geopolitical pivot."

In the case of the Middle East, the long-standing conflict between Israel and the Arab world, or more specifically, with the Palestinian Arabs, has spanned decades. However, following the attacks by the Islamist group Hamas on October 7, 2023, it has taken on the character of a "war," as declared by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This conflict has drawn other actors into the scene, such as the Islamist group Hezbollah from Lebanon, the Houthi rebels from Yemen, and, most notably, for the first time in decades of confrontations, Iran through direct actions.

Once again, the United States is Israel's principal ally. Continuous support, not only through economic resources but also intelligence and technological transfers, has over time strengthened Israel's position and enabled it to face multiple fronts simultaneously. As such, Israel stands as the U.S.'s main ally in the Middle East, backing the American effort to contain Iran in its pursuit of nuclear power status.

Moreover, in response to the emergence of new, non-conventional actors, the U.S. has demonstrated its military capabilities through the deployment of aircraft carrier battle groups, asserting its presence in the region and acting as a security provider for users of this crucial maritime route ¹⁵. In this case as well, U.S. interests aim not only to neutralize and contain Iran's potential entry into the elite group of nuclear-armed states but also to limit its influence across the Arab world.

The arguments presented here also appear to validate Iran as a "geopolitical pivot."

If, in this global overview, we were to shift toward South Asia, specifically the Indian subcontinent, the brief crisis between India and Pakistan over the disputed territories of Kashmir involved large-scale military actions. According to defense analysts, it marked the most significant aerial combat engagement since World War II ¹⁶. In this instance, beyond the tactical outcomes, the conflict also featured Western-made aircraft clashing

¹⁵ Brands, H. (2025). *The Eurasian Century*. Nueva York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.

¹⁶ *Como un ataque aéreo de 25 minutos puede haber presagiado el fin de la superioridad aérea occidental*. (14 May 2025). Source: Galaxia Militar: <https://galaxiamilitar.es/como-un-ataque-aereo-de-25-minutos-en-el-sur-de-asia-puede-haber-presagiado-el-fin-de-la-superioridad-aerea-occidental/>

against Chinese-made jets. The downing of several French-made Rafale fighters by Chinese J-10 CE aircraft has cast doubt on the previously questioned capabilities of military equipment produced by the Asian giant.

As previously noted, India, thanks to its human capital and economic-industrial development, is already a first-order actor. However, despite its role as a regional power, it has yet to fully establish itself as a “geostrategic player.”

The military actions mentioned in the previous paragraph are significant in that they have brought the commercial rivalry between the U.S. and China into the realm of the defense industry as well. This year, under President Donald Trump’s second term in the White House, economic tensions between the two powers have escalated through the imposition of increased tariffs on various products by both sides. The effects of these measures have had global repercussions. Although, in this case, we are not dealing with armed conflict, these actions are nonetheless relevant, as the economy—being one of the instruments of national power—does indeed have “weapons” at its disposal to pursue political goals and/or national interests ¹⁷.

In the Caucasus area, although no significant military actions have taken place this year, the persistent tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region must be mentioned. The military actions of September 2023 were the last episode of friction in a conflict whose root causes remain unresolved. Since their independence in 1991, these clashes have generated new antagonisms, with the intervention, albeit limited, of Western powers seeking to exert influence over a region rich in natural resources ¹⁸.

Although not directly involved, both Russia and the United States have intervened through indirect means. Russia has played an active role as a mediator in successive ceasefire agreements since the first open conflict between 1988 and 1994. Armenia has retained much of the military equipment inherited from the former U.S.S.R., while Azerbaijan, fueled by revenues from oil exports, has significantly modernized its arsenal by acquiring

¹⁷ Chu, C. (2014). Chapter 11 Economics: American Element of Power or Source of Vulnerability? U.S. *Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy* (pág. 157-164). J. Boone Bartholomees.

¹⁸ González, J., Agudela, I., & Rojas, K. (2024). El conflicto de Nagorno-Karabaj y futuro de Eurasia. *Relaciones Internacionales*.

Western-origin technology, especially from Israel ¹⁹, such as ballistic missile systems, rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and loitering munitions. This access reveals indirect support from the United States and its allies.

Currently, both countries are engaged in a peace negotiation process, although its future remains uncertain due to the numerous unresolved issues and ongoing allegations of ceasefire violations. Although Azerbaijan was identified by Zbigniew Brzezinski as a "geopolitical pivot" at the end of the 20th century, today its influence appears to have diminished, as evidenced by the limited impact of this conflict on global strategic dynamics. This apparent loss of centrality lends greater importance to other areas of geopolitical friction, such as Iran and the Indian subcontinent.

In this global overview, we cannot overlook what is happening in East Asia. On the Korean Peninsula, from the particular perspective of armed conflicts, North Korea has silently become part of the war between Russia and Ukraine, initially by supplying ammunition and weapons systems, and since June 2024, through a Strategic Partnership Treaty, by sending soldiers to the battlefield. However, this country does not only create friction with the West in the mentioned conflict; its constant challenge to the United States and threats against South Korea have been a persistent issue, especially since Kim Jong Un assumed the role of supreme leader in December 2011.

Through this deepening of relations with Russia, North Korea has likely sought to update and improve its military training by confronting Ukrainian forces that operate under Western doctrines, in addition to receiving from Russia the necessary technology to enhance its missile systems, particularly its nuclear capabilities. This situation directly impacts Japan, whose defence budget for the current year continues the increase initiated in 2022, a historic shift not seen since World War II ²⁰.

Regarding this geographical area, Taiwan must also be mentioned, along with China's aspiration to incorporate it definitively into its territory—an issue with significant implications. The expansion of China's military power, particularly in the maritime dimension, is directly linked to this aspiration. The development of various capabilities

¹⁹ Shaikh, S., & Rumbaugh, W. (8 December 2020). *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. Source: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-and-missile-war-nagorno-karabakh-lessons-future-strike-and-defense>

²⁰ Arthur, G. (16 January 2025). *Japón aprueba un presupuesto de defensa récord, aunque aún intenta ponerse al día*. Source: Defense News: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2025/01/16/japans-passes-record-defense-budget-while-still-playing-catch-up/>

has allowed China to implement the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, challenging maritime spaces that, until just a couple of decades ago, were under complete U.S. dominance ²¹.

In East Asia, it could be said that the "geopolitical pivot" has now expanded to encompass the entire Korean Peninsula.

The continuous presence, direct or indirect, of the United States in the various armed conflicts and frictions of different kinds described in the preceding paragraphs—and still ongoing in 2025 around the world, particularly in the Eurasian region, demonstrates how, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the U.S. has become the unipolar power of the 20th century, a status it has sought to maintain to this day. This fact is significant in that, for the first time in human history, a single country has become a true global power, and that this position is not held by a Eurasian nation ²².

Final comments

The macro-continent of Eurasia, combining the geopolitical realities of Europe and Asia, constitutes a geographically strategic area at the global level, over which geostrategic actors clash in pursuit of its control.

The potential of Eurasia, both from the perspective of growth in human capital and economic development, continues to pose a challenge for any nation aspiring to achieve the status of predominant world power.

The concept of "geostrategic players" remains valid, but is now limited to three actors: the U.S., Russia, and China. On the other hand, given their particular characteristic tied to geography, the "geopolitical pivots" have been maintained, or their variation is only due to an expansion of the areas of friction, with Ukraine, Turkey, Iran, and the Korean Peninsula being included in this category.

Globalization 2.0, as both an economic phenomenon and one of international relations, having the COVID-19 pandemic as a seismic event, constitutes an additional means to

²¹ Piqué, J. (2024). *La geografía siempre está y la historia siempre vuelve*. Barcelona: Penguin Random House.

²² Ibid 7.

validate how, in different spheres, the superpowers are in permanent friction advancing toward their objectives and national interests.

The ongoing conflicts in the world, unfolding this year 2025, confirm the direct or indirect involvement of the great powers around Eurasia, highlighting the actions of the United States of America in its defense against the recurrent challenges posed by first-order actors such as China and Russia.

In the near future, an increase in frictions of various kinds can be expected, particularly between the U.S. and China, as they confront each other not only militarily but also in other areas such as economic and diplomatic spheres, all with a single purpose: to achieve control over Eurasia.