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# The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World

By Hal Brands (Author) (Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company 2025)

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Hal Brands requires little introduction to scholars of American foreign policy and international security. Brands is the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and the co-author of the widely discussed book titled "Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China," which has been translated into 15 languages. The "Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World" is his latest book in this spectrum. That is a bold attempt to take a geopolitical view of modern world history, to see its most important conflict of the last hundred years as not an American one, but a Eurasian one, a contest for the largest landmass whose resolution is still undecided and whose stakes have never been higher since the Cold War.

The book has five large chapters. Brands begins with the most intellectually stimulating part, a history of classical geopolitical thought, centered around three key figures. The first is Sir Halford Mackinder, the British geographer and parliamentarian who in 1904 predicted that the Eurasian "Heartland" would one day rule the world. The second is Alfred Thayer Mahan, the American naval historian who made sea power the focus of strategic interests. The third is Nicholas Spykman, whose idea of the "Rimland," the coastal fringe around the interior of the Eurasian continent, combined both and gave much of the conceptual support to post-World War II American containment policy. Brands relies on these thinkers not in a historical way, but as tools of the trade. He brings their visions to bear on his conception of the whole of the twentieth century, from the misreading of the Kaiser to the final stages of the Cold War to the present. This is one of the book's most significant intellectual contributions: the recovery of an intellectual tradition of strategic thinking that was largely lost from the scholarly discipline of International Relations since 1945, and the proof that it has explanatory value yet.

The historical chapters that follow are written in a way that has clarity of exposition and an engaging narrative. Brands shows how the First World War, the Second, and the Cold War are all different forms of the same structural battle: autocratic Eurasian land powers trying to win dominance, offshore maritime democracies trying to stop them. He candidly addresses the price and paradoxes of that Western endeavor. He is not hesitant to admit that the U.S. supported authoritarian regimes in Chile, with Pinochet, and Indonesia, with Suharto, when it felt it had to

do so to check the spread of communism. He believes that when the logic of geopolitics is employed without the constraints of democracy, it can yield unexpected results that have ethical concerns. "Geopolitics with a democrat's touch was harsh, but seldom evil. Geopolitics with an autocrat's touch was poison, pure and simple" (p. 31). This is the strength of the book: to keep the moral and strategic aspects separate, without merging one into the other, in the spirit of being mature in a way that a lot of policy writing is not.

Brands's book really becomes timely in the last chapters when he focuses on the present. His case is that this is the beginning of a second century of Eurasia, a new era of revisionist powers, namely, China, Russia, and Iran. He is careful not to give this axis the appearance of being an alliance; the three states have different interests and ideologies. But he persuasively contends that they have a structural interest in challenging the American-led international order, that they have the capacity to profit from each other's ability to draw Western interest and resources, and that their respective actions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's pressure on Taiwan and the South China Sea, Iran's destabilization of the region, are part of a continuum and not separate crises. From this analysis, Brands concludes that the policy implications are both strong and consistent: keep alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific strong, keep the sea lanes open, match industrial capability with strategic need, do not fall for the "theaters" temptation. He makes a persuasive case (some might say a good one) that the United States has been successful in multi-theater competition in the past and should be so now.

The book has certain limitations, which merit fair and direct consideration. The entire argument is neatly structured around the opposition between democracy and autocracy; at times, it is too tidy. Brands is well aware of the tension; these concessions, at the edges, acknowledge American support for repressive regimes, but they do not present themselves as threats to the underpinnings of the framework. The ethical edifice may seem more precarious than Brands suggests to the reader who is approaching the book from a post-colonial perspective or the one who is concerned with the current demise of the democratic norms of Western polities. That is not exactly an ideal position for the United States of 2025 to be in, as its own democratic institutions are in contention.

The analysis also does not reflect a geographic perspective. As far as Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and the rest of the Global South are concerned, Brands' "Eurasian Century" is primarily a tale of Washington and London, with the region's nations inserted as mostly the objects of great-power rivalry rather than players in their own right with interests and calculations. The rise in strategic non-alignment (the stance of many of the world's people, including India, which does not want to make its foreign policy less than binary between Washington and Beijing) is not adequately discussed. This is not a mistake, but the result of the framework, as it is intended to explain the behavior of the major offshore and continental powers, and not the international system as a whole. However, readers should not assume that the author's scope of explanation is unlimited; nor is the rest of the world outside of the North Atlantic and the Pacific Rim as important as it is occasionally portrayed.

A further point concerns the framework's parsimony. Classical geopolitics is powerful precisely because it simplifies: it reduces complex historical dynamics to geography, distance, and the distribution of power. But simplification has costs. The role of economic interdependence, domestic political change, institutional architecture, and transnational actors is not absent from the book, but it is consistently secondary to the geopolitical logic. The fraying

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of the multilateral order since 2008, the stresses on the WTO, the IMF and the UN Security Council, is a phenomenon that geopolitical theory explains only partially. Brands does not claim otherwise, but the framework's gravitational pull means that other causal forces tend to appear as background conditions rather than independent drivers. Scholars working in the liberal institutionalist tradition, G. John Ikenberry's account of the postwar order's durability is the most obvious touchstone, would likely object that Brands understates the degree to which institutions, once created, generate their own logics of cooperation and constraint that outlast the distributions of power that produced them (Ikenberry, 2001; 2011). Constructivist scholars, following Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's work on the diffusion of international norms, would press further, asking how categories that Brands treats as fixed features of the strategic landscape, sovereignty, great-power status, spheres of influence, are themselves the products of historically contingent norm change rather than timeless facts of geography (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The Eurasian Century will reward such readers as a stimulating interlocutor, but it is not a book that fully reckons with either challenge.

These are actual constraints, and it is worth their mention. However, they do not detract from the great success of the book. Brands offers something rare and valuable in a moment when both governments and publics are feeling bewildered in a world that suddenly looks increasingly unsettled and unpredictable: a coherent framework for understanding history. He convincingly establishes that what seems to be a "new turbulence" in global politics, Russia's interference in Ukraine, China's assertiveness in the Pacific, tensions over transatlantic solidarity, is not an ending of the past, but a continuation of its patterns, something that has been in play since the early 20th century. The prose is lucid, and the argument is persuasive; the book rewards attentive and careful reading.

The Eurasian Century, in sum, is a book that treats its reader well. It demands more sustained historical reasoning than contemporary policy writing typically requires, and it repays that demand by situating the present moment within the longer arc of modern geopolitics. Its structure invites challenge on the points noted above, and where it does, it withstands scrutiny. For that reason, the book is especially well suited to graduate and advanced undergraduate curricula in security studies, diplomatic history, and grand strategy, where its synthesis of classical geopolitical theory and twentieth-century case material offers students an efficient point of entry into these debates. Researchers working on great-power competition and grand strategy will likewise find it a useful reference point, less for definitive answers than for the clarity with which it stakes out one influential interpretation of the stakes involved. That is as much as one can reasonably ask of a strategic synthesis, and on those terms, The Eurasian Century succeeds.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse underlying this book review, as well as to its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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