“Out, In, and Down”
Classical Geopolitics and the Balance-of-Power in a New Old World

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Abstract

This article provides a concise analysis of historical perspectives and geopolitical theories, with a focus on Lord Hastings “Pug” Ismay’s tripartite strategy and its implications for contemporary security policies. By examining Ismay’s strategy and its context, the article explores its effectiveness and prescience in addressing collective security challenges. Additionally, the article investigates diverse geopolitical theories that have influenced collective security approaches throughout history, considering their strengths and weaknesses. It offers a comprehensive overview of Ismay’s tripartite strategy, highlighting its components and examining its practical application through historical examples and case studies. This research deepens our understanding of collective security strategies and their relevance to modern security policies. By critically examining historical perspectives and drawing on geopolitical theories, the article contributes to the ongoing discourse on global security dynamics. The analysis aims to enhance our knowledge of the complexities surrounding collective security and provide a foundation for further exploration and debate within the field.

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In 1952, Lord Hastings “Pug” Ismay (1887–1965), the first Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), succinctly outlined the alliance’s strategic objectives with his famous tripartite formula: “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”¹ Pursued via an equitable balance of these three ends, the Alliance’s geopolitical end state sought “an insurance against the unspeakable horror of a [nuclear world] war that would destroy our civilization.”² From his position as NATO Secretary-General, Ismay was arguably the most influential individual in “the arena of global politics”—

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² Lord Hastings Ismay, “Secretary General’s Speech to the North Atlantic Council,” Bonn, Germany, May 1957.
a chief executive of the West’s principle intergovernmental organization and the political leader of the world’s most powerful military alliance.³

For Ismay, a British general with extensive military experience on the Northwest Frontier, in World War I, and as Winston Churchill’s chief military advisor during World War II (1940–1945), the implications of the tripartite security strategy of “Out-In-Down” were clear. While the threat of a cataclysmic nuclear war between the democratic West and communist East was plainly of immediate concern to NATO policy makers throughout the organization’s formative years, the alliance also presumed to manage international conflict more broadly. As such, Ismay’s tripartite prescription for the prevention of global conflict is particularly prescient.⁴

The West, through an interconnected postwar system of collective security predicated on Ismay’s three strategic ends, formed the bulwark of broader international peace and security. This strategy aimed to balance the global polarity and maintain the tenuous yet relatively stable bipolar system between the Soviet Union and the Anglo-American alliance that emerged in the immediate postwar geopolitical environment. It involved containing the Russians east of the Elbe, ensuring American commitment to prevent the isolation of the British Empire, and suppressing German militarism to prevent the resurgence of a highly unstable multipolar system that had dominated Europe for centuries. If the “Russians came in,” the “Americans left,” or the “Germans stood back up,” this strategy would collapse, paving the way toward a return to prewar multipolarity, a new world war and global nuclear annihilation.

Ismay believed that the West should act as a united ideological bloc, with the geopolitical power of the United States serving as a check against anti-Western ideologies, particularly international communism. However, equally important in Ismay’s collective security paradigm was the need to keep potential “revisionist” powers within the West in check. This required their integration into and dependence on a collective Western security strategy, encompassing economic, political, and military aspects.

³ The position of NATO Secretary-General was defined as “a unique figure in international politics... [one] that combines elements of transitional alliance politics, international administration, and multinational diplomacy in a manner not seen elsewhere in the arena of global politics.” Robert S. Jordan and Parley W. Newman, Jr., “The Secretary-General of NATO and Multinational Political Leadership,” International Journal 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1975), 732–57.

⁴ For a view of the West German government during the Bonn Conference: “Dass ein moderner atomarer Krieg ein apokalyptisches Verhängnis sein würde, nich nur für die Bevölkerung der Bundesrepublik und des Westens, sonder für die gesamte Menschheit, einschließlich der Völker des Sowjetblocks, das wissen wir alle.” Chancellor Conrad Adenauer, “Deutschland bekennt sich zur Nato” (speech, NATO Foreign Ministers’ Conference, Bonn, 1957).
While Ismay specifically mentioned Germany as the most likely revisionist power in Europe within the context of North Atlantic relations, he also viewed Japan as the primary revisionist power in the Indo-Pacific. Ismay’s awareness of the threat posed by a revanchist Japan stemmed from his time at the Quetta Staff College in 1922, shortly after World War I. At the college, which served as the primary command and staff institution for senior officers in the British Indian Army, Ismay took part in a significant war game scenario. The scenario involved a theoretical Japanese invasion of Siam, Malaya, and Singapore, despite the ongoing Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902–1923), which would expire the following year. In his role as the Japanese General Staff, Ismay extensively studied Japanese political, economic, and military intentions and capabilities.

In late 1925, Ismay assumed the role of Assistant Secretary for the Committee on Imperial Defence (1904–1947), the primary organ responsible for coordinating and advising on defense policy and strategy within the British Empire. According to Ismay’s biographer Ronald Wingate, his task was to determine “how we should have to defend ourselves in our vast Empire if we should go to war.” In this capacity, Ismay played a significant role over the next four years as one of the key architects of the “War Book,” which outlined the global campaign plan for the defense of the British Empire in the event of war.

After serving as aide-de-camp to Lord Willingdon, Viceroy of India and Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army, with a growing focus on the Japanese threat, Ismay returned to Whitehall in May 1933. He assumed leadership of the Eastern Intelligence Division at the War Office, which held a wide-ranging portfolio covering the Far East, Japan, Russia, and the United States. In this role, Ismay increasingly concentrated on Japan’s geopolitical ambitions, especially following its withdrawal from the League of Nations in March 1933 after the occupation of Manchuria.

In 1936, Ismay resumed his position at the Committee on Imperial Defence as Deputy Chief and eventually assumed leadership of the committee in 1938. With the outbreak of war in Europe, the committee was absorbed by the War Department, and Ismay took on the role of chief staff officer and principal military

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5 The Committee on Imperial Defense (CID) incorporated representatives from the Dominions and served as a form of National Security Council staff for the prime minister and cabinet. The CID was the principal defense strategy organ for the empire until it was rebranded the Defense Committee (1947). For more on the structure and history of the CID, see: Chad T. Manske, The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up: Lessons for the US National Security Council from the British Committee of Imperial Defence, Walker Paper 15 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2009), 9–34, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

6 Wingate, Lord Ismay, 21.

advisor to Churchill. As Churchill held the positions of Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Britain, Ismay also served as secretary of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, which served as the primary platform for imperial interservice defense policy. In this capacity, Ismay coordinated defense policy in anticipation of an increasingly likely war with Japan. He focused on the “Singapore Strategy,” aiming to address the geopolitical concerns of Australia, New Zealand, India, and other British Empire territories east of Suez.

However, Ismay’s position, which he had developed during the Quetta staff exercise in 1922, was reversed when the Japanese invaded Malaya in December 1941. Despite advocating for the abandonment of outlying territories like Hong Kong and the substantial reinforcement of Singapore prior to the war, Ismay’s recommendations were ignored in Whitehall. Within a mere six weeks, the Japanese 25th Army, led by General Tomoyuki Yamashita, captured Singapore and ended Britain’s two-century-long dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Ironically, Yamashita’s operational plan for attacking Singapore from the north via Malaya closely mirrored the proposal Ismay had made when playing the role of the Japanese General Staff during the Quetta exercise two decades earlier.

Ismay undoubtedly grasped the volatility of geopolitical alignments and the paramount importance of national interest in international relations. As a former cavalryman on the Northwest Frontier, he personally witnessed Japan’s transformation from a key ally to a grave threat to British influence in the Indo-Pacific. Through the Anglo-Japanese alliance (1902–1923), Britain had empowered Japan to safeguard British interests and security in the region, countering imperial rivals like Russia and Germany. From 1914 to 1918, the Imperial Japanese Navy played a vital role in securing allied communication lines and British territories spanning from the Suez Canal to the Straits of Magellan. However, within the alliance’s initial successes lay the seeds of its eventual dissolution.

With its eastern flank protected by its Japanese partners, Britain could shift the majority of its military strength from the Indo-Pacific to the home islands, better addressing the rising threat posed by a belligerent Germany and its naval expansion (1898–1914). By 1906, shortly after Japan’s decisive victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), approximately one-third of all British

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8 Ismay, The Memoirs of Lord Ismay, 238.
ships in the region were redeployed to the home islands.\textsuperscript{10} This reallocation had been the British policy makers’ intention from the outset.\textsuperscript{11} Japan would assume the bulk of British defense obligations in the Indo-Pacific as British national security interests shifted toward the European continent.\textsuperscript{12} During World War One, as British priorities increasingly focused on achieving victory in Europe, their long-standing alliance with Japan took a backseat to foster a closer relationship with the United States, whose support for the Entente war effort was of utmost importance.\textsuperscript{13}

However, the diverging national interests between the United States and Japan regarding their respective dominance in the Pacific exacerbated the realignment of British geopolitical priorities toward the United States. In the aftermath of racially charged attempts by the United States to contain Japanese economic, political, Naval Conference (1921-22), Anglo-Japanese national interests were irreparably severed by 1923.\textsuperscript{14} Japan, already significantly empowered by two decades of British deference, suddenly emerged as the dominant geopolitical force in the Western Pacific. With Britain officially ending its alliance with Japan in March 1923 and pivoting toward the United States, Japan was left as the principal power in the Indo-Pacific, outside the Anglo-umbrella of political and economic security. This resulted in a complete shift in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, transforming the Anglo-Japanese-American “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” entente


\textsuperscript{13} For more on the divergence of national interests within the Anglo-Japanese alliance, see: Ian Nish, Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908–23 (London: Athlone Press, 1972).

into a nationalist and anti-Western Japanese power that fundamentally opposed the Anglo-American order it was now rejected by.\textsuperscript{15}

Ismay personally witnessed this rapid divergence of national interests between Britain and Japan from his positions in intelligence, policy, and planning in India and Whitehall. He observed the increasing instability in the Indo-Pacific as Anglo-Japanese interests rapidly diverged and a multipolar regional balance took shape. In less than two decades, he saw Britain’s staunch Indo-Pacific ally realign into a partner that posed an existential threat in Europe, forming a transcontinental Axis committed to toppling the Anglo-world order.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, Ismay experienced the culmination of this deviation from the vantage point of British imperial defense policy throughout six years of total war. It was from these experiences that Ismay formulated his tripartite security strategy for the postwar period.

For Ismay, preventing global catastrophe required a united West, led by the United States, and based on an anti-Western bogeyman that provided an impetus for alignment of the block’s national security interests. Ismay understood that a united Western bloc was only possible if a broad consensus of national security interests were maintained—a task that required the utmost care and attention. In his embrace of the centrality of national interest to multipolarity, Ismay harnessed the words of British Foreign Minister Lord Palmerstone (1784–1865), who famously stated in 1848: “it is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy of England. We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”\textsuperscript{17}

Ismay rightly deduced that any divergence of national security interests would split Western powers into traditional nation-state rivalries dominated by conflicts over land and resources. Predicated on the inescapable “primacy of geography” in human relations, these rivalries would ensure the return of an unstable multipolar world order.\textsuperscript{18} In his assessment, Ismay echoed the idea that “primacy of geography”


\textsuperscript{17} Viscount Palmerston, Speech to the House of Commons regarding the Treaty of Adrianople, London, 1 March 1848, HC Deb 01, March 1848, Vol. 97, cc 66–123.

plays a fundamental role in shaping international dynamics and conflicts.\textsuperscript{19} According to Ismay, conflicts over land and resources are intensified by physical proximity, leading to greater incentives for expansion and more destructive conflicts over time.\textsuperscript{20} This perspective aligns with his belief that centuries of unbridled intra-Western conflict, culminating in the two World Wars, were ultimately rooted in the “primacy of geography.”

Ismay’s “Out-In-Down” tripartite prescription for a Western collective security strategy reflected the salient features of the Anglo-American geopolitical theories dominating international relations during the period. Thus, Ismay firmly rooted his approach in the concept of the “primacy of geography” and, as a result, it aligned with the broad Anglo-American security consensus of the postwar period. This consensus was epitomized by George Kennan’s famous “containment” policy. The nearly seven decades of limited conflict that followed provide evidence of the validity of Ismay’s “Out-In-Down” approach in managing interstate competition.

However, with the collapse of the Communist threat in 1991, Western national interests began to decouple at an increasing rate. Despite attempts to identify a unifying boogeyman such as rogue regimes, transnational terrorism, and international criminal syndicates, the individual national interests of Western nations continued to diverge without the anchoring presence of a pan-Eurasian geopolitical threat. Even the response to emerging threats posed by revisionist powers like China and Russia is leading to divisions within the West, as different interest groups align regionally.\textsuperscript{21}

Furthermore, the breakdown of Western unity and Ismay’s collective security strategy has been exacerbated by domestic trends toward isolationism in the United States. The threat of American withdrawal empowers the growing geopolitical assertiveness and autonomy of Germany and Japan, the revisionist Western powers highlighted by Ismay. As a result, all three of Ismay’s strategic objectives are


\textsuperscript{20} For an excellent treatment of this phenomena in Europe, particularly before the Treaty of Vienna (1815), see: Paul M. Kennedy, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000} (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1988), 86–100.

crumbling, leading the world back toward an unstable multipolar order, which is the opposite of Ismay’s intended end state for Western security.\(^\text{22}\)

While current security discourse focuses on the emerging Eurasian “poles” such as Russia, China, and even India, the importance of Ismay’s third admonishment, which emphasizes keeping revisionist powers “down,” is severely neglected in US policy. Ismay recognized that Germany and Japan have the inherent capacity to assume regional polarity. The management of this “latent polarity,” as I term it, remains a widely misunderstood aspect of America’s international security architecture. While Washington slowly shifts its national security focus from transnational terrorism to geopolitical competition with Russia and China, it fails to address the management of Japan and Germany’s latent polarity. In fact, recent American efforts to persuade and coerce Japan and Germany to increase defense spending and burden sharing to levels that domestic audiences perceive as extortion will only hasten the re-emergence of autonomous, and potentially independent, Japanese and German-led geopolitical poles on opposite ends of Eurasia.\(^\text{23}\) Essentially, current US security policy is recreating the geopolitical conditions that led to the divergence of the Anglo-Japanese alliance a century ago.

This article delves into the intricacies of Japan’s latent polarity from the perspective of classical geopolitics and asserts that current political, military, and economic trends are paving the way for the emergence of an independent Japanese geopolitical pole in the Indo-Pacific. The article suggests that this development will undoubtedly undermine US primacy in the region, much like it did for Britain during the interbellum period. This analysis gains particular significance considering the recently concluded US–Japan bilateral negotiations for a new Special Measures Agreement (SMA) of 2022–2026 which, under the Trump administration, had originally demanded a 300-percent increase in Japanese burden sharing.\(^\text{24}\)


\(^{24}\) Then–National Security Advisor John Bolton delivered the demand to Japan in July 2019, in addition to a separate demand to South Korea for a 400-percent increase to their burden-sharing agreement. Seligman and Gramer, “Trump asks Tokyo.” See, also: “Trump touts U.S.–Japan alliance as treaty turns 60, but urges Tokyo to do more,” \textit{Japan Times}, 19 January 2020.
While these demands were ultimately reduced under the Biden administration, the possibility of a US disengagement from East Asia is now very real for Government of Japan. This, combined with geopolitical uncertainties following Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, is rapidly fueling Japanese up-armament and defense self-sufficiency.

**Ismay’s Collective Security Strategy—MacKinder, Spykman, and the Primacy of Geography**

The first pillar of Ismay’s collective security strategy, “to keep the Russians out,” aimed to prevent the dominance of an anti-Western hegemonic power in the Eurasian continent. Ismay viewed the “Russians” as the principal center of international communism and a significant threat. However, this point essentially echoed Halford J. Mackinder’s thesis in *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904) and encapsulated decades of Anglo-American geopolitical thinking. Mackinder’s concept of Eurasia as the “World-Island” combined historical developments with railway and telegraph innovations, presenting inner-Eurasia, spanning from the Volga to the Yangtze, as a geopolitical “pivot” or continental “heartland” with the potential for global dominance.

For Mackinder, the control of Europe west of the Volga by a heartland power was the ultimate stepping stone for world domination, while an East Asian power penetrating deep into Siberia and Central Asia represented a “yellow peril to the world’s freedom.”

Ismay’s second pillar, “to keep the Americans in,” highlighted the American inclination toward isolationism as an equally perilous threat to international peace. Paul Kennedy observes that among the Great Powers before 1914, only America enjoyed “relative invulnerability and a freedom from the ambivalence which plagued” Europe and East Asia due to its geographic distance from the World-Island. However, after 1945, if the United States relinquished its security responsibilities on

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25 Japanese defense outlays jumped by 26 percent between Japanese Fiscal Year 2022 and 2023, with plans to reach 2 percent of GDP in 2027—the first time in more than three decades. This comes after nine straight years of increases outpacing inflation. Emphasis is being given to precision munition stockpiles, unmanned aerial systems, and force projection capabilities. Takahashi Kosuke, “Japan Approves 26.3% Increase in Defense Spending for Fiscal Year 2023,” *The Diplomat*, 24 December 2022.


29 Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, 93.
both ends of the World-Island, referred to by Mackinder as the “Islands of the Inner or Marginal Crescent,” it would cede the initiative to an anti-Western heartland hegemon, particularly the Soviet Union and its allies. If America retreated into Mackinder’s “Islands of the Outer or Insular Crescent,” encompassing the Western Hemisphere, the “Marginal Crescent” would be unable to resist the heartland’s dominance, thereby allowing it to control the “Insular Crescent.”

Figure 1. Mackinder’s “Natural Seats of Power”: The “Pivot” or Heartland, the Inner or Marginal Crescent, and the Outer or Insular Crescent.

One of Mackinder’s chief critics, Nicholas J. Spykman, emphasized the crucial importance of unwavering US commitment to the “Marginal Crescent.” In his work “The Geography of the Peace” (1944), Spykman, who renamed the “Marginal Crescent” as the “Rimland,” presented a significantly different proposition from Mackinder. According to Spykman, the Rimland was not of marginal significance but rather the true geographic pivot of history—the battleground between the land

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powers of Eurasia and the maritime powers of the “Insular Crescent.” In opposition to Mackinder, Spykman asserted in his work “The Geography of the Peace” (1944), Spykman, who renamed the “Marginal Crescent” as the “Rimland,” presented a significantly different proposition from Mackinder. According to Spykman, the Rimland was not of marginal significance but rather the true geographic pivot of history—the battleground between the land powers of Eurasia and the maritime powers of the “Insular Crescent.” In opposition to Mackinder, Spykman asserted, “who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.”

He believed it was both natural and necessary for the United States to form strong alliances with the other two major powers of the “Insular Crescent”—Britain and Japan. With a united “Insular Crescent,” power could be projected into the Rimland, encompassing Western Europe and East Asia, effectively countering the Heartland’s hegemony on the World-Island.

Ismay incorporated Spykman’s thesis into the second pillar of his collective security strategy. As the world’s leading maritime state and dominant power in the “Insular Crescent,” the commitment of the United States to the Rimland was central to containing the inherent hegemony of the Heartland. Therefore, Spykman’s and Mackinder’s theories played a pivotal role in the American policy of containment, which linked the Rimland to the Insular Crescent. Throughout the 1950s, under the guidance of George Kennan and John Foster Dulles, “the rim of Eurasia from Scandinavia to the Philippines, was thus enmeshed with a system of military and political alliances.” By the time Ismay presented his admonishment, the objective of “keeping the Americans in” was becoming the official policy of the United States.

Traditionally, the debate on management approaches to America’s system of alliances and her geopolitical national security ends here. The analysis of the value of America’s “Rimland” system of alliances, from NATO to Japan, is framed as a simple dichotomy: is there a threat to regional American interests from Eurasia, and is the threat significant enough to justify continued American commitment efforts? Following the Cold War and coinciding with the resurgence of Russia and China, this dichotomy continues to dominate America’s approach to alliance management, especially concerning Ismay’s latent poles. Consequently, there is an

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34 George Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 137.
increasing breakdown of America’s “hub-and-spokes” alliance system of bilateral relationships, and a shifting realignment of American regional allies toward latent Japanese and German poles in the Rimland.\textsuperscript{35}

In Europe, the idea of a “geopolitical Europe” led by a Franco-German partnership is gaining traction within European policy circles.\textsuperscript{36} The Economist put it more straightforwardly in June 2020, stating, “Germany is doomed to lead Europe.”\textsuperscript{37} Fortunately, NATO and the European Union, supported by countries like Britain, France, Italy, and Poland, which are more cautious of German dominance, can to some extent restrain German hegemony in Europe.\textsuperscript{38}

However, the situation in the Indo-Pacific seems different, as there are few regional intergovernmental organizations and even fewer Western-aligned powers that can counterbalance the emergence of a Japanese pole in the region. In fact, states that once sought Anglo-American support for protection against Imperial Japan are now turning to Japan for leadership in forming a collective response to a rising China and a receding United States. This has led to what a recent study by the Rand Corporation referred to as a “thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation” among American bilateral allies. This trend “has the potential to create, realign, or simply reflect changes in regional actors’ interests, identities, and commitments in important ways that could reinforce or reduce U.S. influence.”\textsuperscript{39}

Ultimately, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the emerging threat posed by China against Taiwan do not, in themselves, present systemic challenges to the global balance of power. However, the second- and third-order consequences of these threats, such as the remilitarization of significant regional powers in response, give rise to serious long-term challenges to the postwar order. In the coming decade, American policy makers will need to skillfully balance the ascent of these powers while preventing the fragmentation of the West into a multipolar constellation.\textsuperscript{µ}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Charlemagne, “Germany is Doomed to Lead Europe,” \textit{The Economist}, 27 July 2020.
  \item According to a recent Pew survey, Europeans broadly agree that Germany has too much influence in the EU, at a rate of 49 percent to 36 percent. Bruce Stokes, Richard Wike, and Dorothy Manevich, “Post-Brexit, Europeans More Favorable Toward EU,” Pew Research Center, 15 June 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/.
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“Out, In, and Down”

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