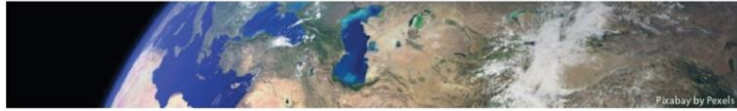




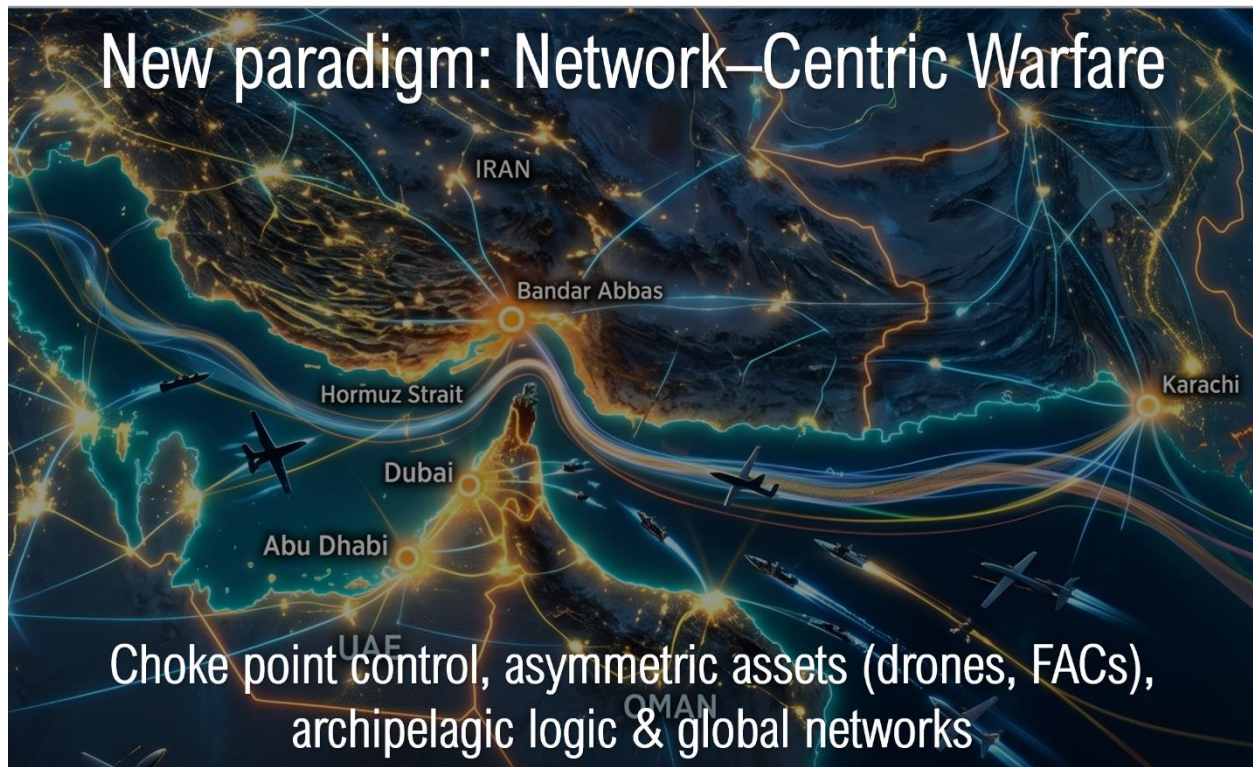
COMMENTO
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Hormuz: a confirmation of archipelagic-reticular power

The shift from oceanic dominance to nodal control in maritime geopolitics

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Introduction

The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis exposes the inadequacy of classical geopolitical frameworks. The traditional dualism between Mahan's *Sea Power* — blue-water naval supremacy — and Mackinder's *Land Power* — Eurasian continental hegemony — proves insufficient in an era of advanced globalization and asymmetric warfare. The conflict demonstrates how a regional power can neutralize a conventional navy through A2/AD systems, making control of a chokepoint more decisive than fleet superiority. The essay introduces the concept of **archipelagic-reticular power**: whoever governs strategic straits and logistical nodes dominates Spykman's Rimland — and with it, the destinies of Eurasia. Grounded in the theoretical insights of Gipouloux, Fioravanzo, Khanna,

we propose a modern rewriting of Spykman's maxim: *Who controls the chokepoints and the nodal hubs rules the Rimland; who connects Eurasia commands the destinies of the world.*

Hormuz as a Theoretical Testing Ground

For over a century, maritime geopolitics has been shaped by the Mahan-Mackinder dichotomy. Mahan identified three pillars of sea power: commanding the open ocean to deny its use to adversaries; achieving fleet supremacy through decisive battle; and controlling maritime lines of communication and chokepoints to protect one's own trade while blockading the enemy's.

For Mahan, therefore, «...*the control of the sea, and especially of those great lines of communication along which the trade of a nation or of the world passes, is the central element of maritime power*»¹ and, based on these assumptions, we could say that the third point represents a fraction of what today might be defined as part of archipelagic-reticular power.

Mackinder, on the contrary, entrusted the destiny of the world to the control of the Eurasian Heartland, a continental fortress theoretically inaccessible to naval power. For Mackinder: «*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.*»²

China's Belt and Road Initiative challenges traditional territorial dominance, reinterpreting Mackinder's Heartland not as a physically controlled fortress but as a network of strategic nodes and communication lines — what may be called *nodal telluric power*.

While Mahan saw the sea as the path to global power, Mackinder recognized that railways and land transport could match or surpass maritime mobility, making continental reach equally decisive. This dualism — thalassocracy versus tellurocracy — defined great power strategy throughout much of the 20th century, functioning as a foundational formula for geopolitical competition.

The Cold War marked a turning point when Spykman's Rimland theory superseded Mackinder's Heartland model. Rather than the continental interior, Spykman assigned strategic primacy to Eurasia's coastal fringes — a zone of friction between sea and land power. Controlling the Rimland meant containing continental powers and denying them ocean access, forming the theoretical backbone of America's Cold War containment strategy against the USSR. Yet Spykman's framework remained fundamentally anchored to maritime supremacy: «*Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world*»³, but are we still at this point today, or do the events that unfolded in Hormuz confront us with questions that old benchmarks cannot help us answer? Spykman himself had theorized that: «...*the rimland of the Eurasian land mass must be viewed as an intermediate region, situated as it is between the heartland and the marginal sea. It*

¹ The sentence represents a concise paraphrase of Mahan's thought, developed on the basis of the Italian edition published by the Historical Office of the Italian Navy (*Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare*, 1994), specifically within the introductory chapters and the discussion on maritime trade. Mahan, Alfred Thayer, *L'influenza del potere marittimo sulla storia (1660–1783)* [The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783], Trans. from English by Admiral Antonio Flamigni. Rome: Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, 1994.

² Mackinder, H. J., *Democratic ideals and reality: A study in the politics of reconstruction*, London, UK, Constable and Company, 1919, p. 23.

³ Spykman Nicholas J., *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1944, p.43.

*functions as a vast buffer zone of conflict between sea power and land power.»*⁴, but today the Rimland is no longer a buffer zone, an intermediate region; it represents strategic centrality itself.

Advanced globalization, the digital revolution, and urbanization have fundamentally eroded traditional geopolitical paradigms. Power no longer stems from territorial possession or naval patrolling, but from designing, managing, and protecting interconnected networks of strategic nodes — the logic of *archipelagic-reticular power*.

Operation "Epic Fury," launched on February 28, 2026, transformed the Strait of Hormuz into a living geopolitical laboratory. Within a corridor barely thirty kilometers wide — through which roughly one-fifth of global crude oil and one-quarter of LNG transit — the crisis offers precise empirical validation of archipelagic-reticular theory. This is no anomaly; it signals a definitive paradigm shift.

The essay proposes a synthesis: Mahan's archipelagic maritime power combined with Mackinder's reticular telluric power, ultimately reappraising Spykman's framework for the 21st century's networked, node-driven geopolitical reality.

«Who controls the chokepoints and the nodal hubs rules the Rimland; who connects Eurasia commands the destinies of the world».

The node worth more than a fleet: the crisis of mahanian strategic doctrine

Mahan's doctrine equates naval supremacy with global power — the strongest fleet controls the seas and, with them, world trade. The Hormuz crisis has empirically and brutally exposed the inadequacy of this assumption.

Iran, without a competitive conventional navy, demonstrated that controlling one strategic node suffices to neutralize US power projection. Through A2/AD assets — fast attack craft, drone swarms, mines, and electronic warfare — it rendered Hormuz transit economically unsustainable, effectively checkmating the world's most advanced fleet.⁵

The most telling data lies in the cost ratio: each Shahed drone, with a price tag fluctuating between twenty thousand and fifty thousand dollars, consumed a PAC-3 interceptor missile valued at approximately four million dollars, resulting in a multiplier of 130 to 1. In forty days, the Pentagon expended an estimated 28 to 35 billion dollars on weapons and ammunition.⁶

Hormuz reveals a paradigm crisis: classical naval power was conceived to dominate open spaces, not to defend a bottleneck where the very geometry of the operational theater nullifies the advantages of qualitative superiority. In a thirty-kilometer corridor, the size of the fleet does not

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ Galdorisi, Jerry, e Paul McLeary. 2026. «Iran's Anti-Access and Area Denial Strategy Is Cruder Than China's But Still Dangerous». *War on the Rocks*, 7 aprile 2026.

⁶ Cancian, Mark F. 2026. Last Rounds? Status of Key Munitions at the Iran War Ceasefire. Washington, DC: *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), 21 aprile 2026.

matter: what matters is who controls the node.⁷

The theoretical construction of archipelagic-reticular power

The literature on archipelagic power, through the distinct formulations of François Gipouloux, Giuseppe Fioravanzo, and Parag Khanna, had already identified the structures that the events in Hormuz have brought to light. I will attempt to synthesize the thought of these three authors.

François Gipouloux

French economist François Gipouloux offers one of the most systematic articulations of archipelagic-reticular power, building on Braudel and Lombard's foundational concepts. He identifies a transnational maritime corridor stretching from Vladivostok to Singapore — encompassing the Yellow Sea, South China Sea, and Celebes Sea — not as a geopolitical periphery, but as an interconnected archipelago of city-states and port hubs.

Gipouloux contrasts two models of power: continental power, characterized by rigid territorial control, autarky, and bureaucratic centralization; and archipelagic power, defined by flexibility, local autonomy, commercial flows, and trade institutions built organically from below. In this framework, the city-state — governed by adaptive financial systems — emerges as a compelling alternative to the centralized nation-state.

For Gipouloux, archipelagic-reticular power represents the triumph of maritime fluidity over territorial rigidity. Sovereignty is no longer measured in square kilometers of controlled land, but in a node's capacity to connect to global networks of goods, capital, and information. Applied to the Hormuz crisis, this framework proves remarkably prescient: strategic chokepoints and urban-commercial hubs, rather than vast territories or battle fleets, determine who truly commands the arteries of global power.

According to François Gipouloux, a reticular power system can be defined as: "...that power in which sovereignty and influence are not exercised through the homogenous control of vast land borders, but rather through the capacity to connect autonomous urban 'islands' and port hubs arranged along a maritime corridor. This power is fueled by the fluidity of flows (mercantile, financial, and migratory), coordinated by transnational trust networks (such as diasporas), and manifests itself through the competition and complementarity of major hub-cities capable of evading, or reshaping, the bureaucratic constraints of territorial empires."⁸

Giuseppe Fioravanzo

In a 1943 text, Admiral Giuseppe Fioravanzo, an officer of profound strategic culture within the Italian Navy, developed the theory of the "four Mediterraneans." Basing his premise on the evaluation of the Mediterranean as a universal geopolitical category—a closed or semi-closed sea, hemmed in by large continental landmasses, which acts as a hinge for global trade and fleets—he sought to identify common features in three other similar seas. For him, these became the American

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ Gipouloux François, *La Méditerranée asiatique. Villes portuaires et réseaux marchands en Chine, au Japon et en Asie du Sud-Est, XVIe-XXIe siècle*, CNRS Éditions (Centre national de la recherche scientifique), Paris, 2009, pp. 15-23.

Mediterranean, the Australasian Mediterranean, and the Japanese Mediterranean. According to Fioravanzo, control of these maritime hinges determines global supremacy. Whoever dominates the compulsory passages (chokepoints) of these seas, controls the global lines of communication.

In the case of the Mediterranean, Fioravanzo's vision was entirely innovative, as the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf were treated as integral and constituent parts of what he termed the "Latin Mediterranean" (or the Euro-Asiatic-African maritime system), which the Italian Navy today defines as the "Wider Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo Allargato*). For Fioravanzo, a sea qualifies geopolitically as a "Mediterranean" if it meets specific criteria: it must be a closed or semi-closed sea, encompassed by continental masses, whose entry and exit points are regulated by chokepoints.

Thus, the Red Sea represents a narrow maritime corridor between two continents (Africa and Asia), locked by Suez to the north and Bab el-Mandeb to the south, becoming a natural and indispensable extension of the classical Mediterranean after the cutting of the Suez Canal. Meanwhile, the Persian Gulf is a semi-closed basin—a strategic dead end sealed by the Strait of Hormuz, which represents the nexus of the energy and commercial resources of the Eurasian landmass.⁹

Parag Khanna

Parag Khanna's *Connectography* (2016) represents the contemporary theoretical apex of reticular geopolitical thinking. Where Gipouloux applied network logic to Asian history and Fioravanzo mapped global maritime geometries, Khanna reframes the entire world order: states are no longer defined by rigid borders but by their capacity to attract, move, or block flows of goods, data, energy, and people.

In Khanna's framework, territorial sovereignty becomes secondary to connectivity. What matters is not how much land a state controls, but whether it can guarantee the continuity and speed of its connections — pipelines, trade routes, submarine fiber-optic cables, and digital highways increasingly outweigh national frontiers as determinants of power. True dominance belongs to those who govern the nodes and cables through which contemporary civilization flows.

The Hormuz crisis provides perfect empirical validation. Hundreds of stranded vessels, millions of barrels removed from global markets within days, and a sharp spike in Brent crude prices collectively demonstrate that disrupting a single chokepoint triggers not a local incident but a systemic global shock. This is the logic of "supply chain warfare" — conflicts no longer fought to occupy enemy capitals, but to disrupt, divert, or monopolize the vital flows upon which adversaries' economic survival depends.

From this emerges Khanna's pivotal concept of *nodal power*, which supplants traditional territorial hegemony: power accrues to whoever controls the compulsory transit points of the interconnected global ecosystem — the nodes through which the modern world inevitably passes. The Strait of Hormuz, in this light, is not merely a waterway but the ultimate expression of nodal power in action: «the capacity of a geopolitical actor or an infrastructural hub (global city, port, technology district, maritime strait) to exercise global systemic influence not through territorial sovereignty, but through

⁹ Fioravanzo, Giuseppe, *Il Mediterraneo centro strategico del mondo*, Roma, Ministero della Marina, 1943.

its position of centrality, density, and irreplaceability within global networks and supply chains.»¹⁰ Nodal power belongs to those controlling the crossroads where global flows of goods, capital, data, and energy converge. Rather than dominating surrounding territory, nodal powers accelerate, redirect, or block globalization's flows, making other network nodes structurally dependent. Consequently, connectivity surpasses size — small states can wield disproportionate influence — while diversification builds resilience and deep supply chain integration generates leverage, bargaining power, and geopolitical attraction.

Archipelagic-reticular power: a definition

After analyzing three thinkers who have outlined a series of interesting theories, as I approach the conclusion of this work, I have decided to reference the thought published in a book edited by the Italian Navy, *Mediterranei globali (Global Mediterraneans)*, he synthesised several concepts of immense strategic significance.¹¹

The view of, "mediterraneans" represent the pulse of the transition toward a multipolar world; they are spaces saturated with friction where asymmetric threats and symmetric competitions between great powers coexist. These narrow seas are configured in such a way that if a single point becomes destabilized, the effects reverberate on a global scale. The maritime dimension merges with cyber, terrestrial, and energy domains, and strategic control can only be achieved by managing the complexity of the geopolitical interactions present within the basin.¹²

The world's great "mediterraneans" (the Euro-Afro-Asian, the Caribbean, the South China Sea, etc.) are not merely geographical or mercantile spaces, but actual Regional Security Complexes. This means that the defense structures and threat perceptions of the states bordering them (or projecting power into them) are so inextricably interconnected that the security of one cannot be separated from that of the others. Moreover, a paradox of globalization emerges: while economic flows are global, security dynamics are becoming heavily "regionalized." Mediterraneans become the primary arenas in which this regionalization crystallizes. The "Wider Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo allargato*) is no longer just a operational guideline for the Italian Navy, but the scientific description of a Regional Security Complex that links the historical Mediterranean to the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and out into the Western Indian Ocean. Within this space, geopolitical anarchy forces actors to forge fluid alliances and confront shared threats, transforming the basin into a barometer of global stability.¹³

In light of the analyses conducted thus far, the concept of **archipelagic-reticular power** can be defined as: *“the capacity of a geopolitical actor to exercise systemic influence not through the homogenous control of vast territories, but through the strategic management of nodes and chokepoints—whether port, energy, digital, or infrastructural—positioned along interconnected maritime and terrestrial corridors. This power is fueled by the fluidity of flows (mercantile, financial,*

¹⁰ Khanna, Parag, *Connectography: Le mappe del futuro ordine mondiale*, Roma, Fazi Editore, 2016.

¹¹ Various Authors, *Mediterranei globali. Politiche e strategie per i «mari ristretti»*, Rome, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2025.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 71-83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-291.

energy, and informational), solidifies through the node's position of centrality and irreplaceability within global networks, and expresses itself in the ability to accelerate, redirect, or block the supply chains upon which the economic survival of adversaries depends. Sovereignty, within this logic, is measured not in square kilometers but in connectivity: whoever controls the compulsory crossroads commands the flows; whoever commands the flows governs the system.”

Conclusions

The Strait of Hormuz crisis has done more than disrupt global energy markets — it has exposed the structural obsolescence of the strategic frameworks that governed great power competition for over a century. Mahan's battle fleet, Mackinder's Heartland, and even Spykman's Rimland were conceived for a world where power was measured in territory controlled and tonnage deployed. That world no longer exists.

Robert Kagan has warned that Washington is heading toward "total defeat" in its confrontation with Iran — a setback he describes as one that *«can neither be repaired nor ignored.»* The admission is remarkable precisely because of its source: a lifelong architect of American military primacy acknowledging that if Iran ends this conflict in control of the strait, it completely changes the situation in the Gulf, giving Tehran enormous leverage not only with the United States but with the rest of the world.¹⁴

This outcome is not an anomaly. It is the logical consequence of a paradigm shift that the theoretical framework of archipelagic-reticular power had already anticipated. Iran did not need a blue-water navy to checkmate the most advanced fleet in history; it needed only to control one irreplaceable node. With control of the strait, Iran emerges as the key player in the region, the roles of China and Russia are strengthened, and the role of the United States substantially diminished.

The concept of archipelagic-reticular power proposed in this essay is not merely a theoretical rewriting of Spykman. It is a response to an empirical reality that classical frameworks cannot explain. A regional power, armed with drones costing tens of thousands of dollars, has neutralized billions in conventional military investment — validating Gipouloux's fluidity over rigidity, Khanna's nodal power over territorial sovereignty, Fioravanzo's chokepoint centrality, and the Italian Navy's Regional Security Complexes as the true arenas of 21st-century competition.

Whoever controls the chokepoints and the nodal hubs rules the Rimland; who connects Eurasia commands the destinies of the world. Hormuz has turned this proposition from theory into fact. The paradigm has shifted. The question now is whether Western strategic thought is ready to follow.

¹⁴ Kagan, Robert, Checkmate in Iran, *The Atlantic*, may 10 2026.