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Heartland vs. Rimland

The Battle Lines in the War for the Next Global Order

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1) At first glance, today's strategic map seems familiar. A bloc of land-based powers, clustered around the center of Eurasia, is challenging a liberal, maritime order headed by an offshore superpower. China and Russia, reinforced by Iran and North Korea and ringed by autocracies from Belarus to Myanmar, now occupy the role that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and the Soviet Union each once held—continental empires seeking to dominate Eurasia and project power globally. The United States, like the United Kingdom before it, remains the only actor capable of anchoring a great arc of coastal and maritime countries across North America, Europe, and East Asia that hem in the Eurasian supercontinent. The rhythm of geopolitics repeats itself: an autocratic axis, emerging from the continental heartland, seeks to rupture rimland barriers that buffer the wider world.

2) The heartland of today, however, is not a mere replica of its predecessors. It isn't a single empire marching across Eurasia but a loose league of revisionists motivated by a shared loathing of liberal ideals and American power. These countries cannot steamroll vast regions as Napoleon and Hitler once did. Instead, they wield modern tools—cyberattacks and digital disinformation campaigns, precision-guided arms and nuclear-tipped missiles—that afford them the power to weaken opposing rimland alliances and even to strike the United States itself. Most critically, these Eurasian autocracies are connected. They expand by laying cables and signing contracts as much as by deploying columns of tanks; they weaponize global interdependence to weaken the rimland order from within. China anchors this new heartland, seeking global power on land, through its Belt and Road Initiative; at sea, in a record-busting military buildup; and in the digital

cloud, through telecommunications networks, payment platforms, and surveillance systems. Together, these offensives imperil rimland dominance by linking China's growing virtual empire to old-fashioned terrestrial designs.

3) Yet this heartland has a built-in contradiction: it is at once fierce and feeble. Its core—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—can wield powerful coercive leverage, generating acute crises through cyberattacks, nuclear brinkmanship, and opportunistic military probes. But it still lacks the economic and technological strengths to prevail in a generational rivalry over a countervailing, U.S.-led coalition.

4) The rimland coalition is unmatched in power but dangerously fractured in purpose. The United States sits atop a patchwork of regional security webs, economic and technology clubs, and values clusters. This distributed empire is open and adaptive but also vulnerable to drift and division. Adversaries have been able to exploit the openness of Western markets, institutions, and technologies, and globalization has weakened the domestic consensus that underpinned rimland cohesion. Allies sheltered by American power have become dependents rather than force multipliers, with some now viewing U.S. unilateralism as a greater threat than the heartland aggressors themselves. The United States has become an ambivalent protector, prone to protectionist and sometimes predatory impulses. Tensions over the war in Iran have reflected this breakdown, as several allies withheld support or openly distanced themselves from U.S. action rather than rallying behind it. The result is a rimland beset by internal discord, while heartland autocracies remain united by their desire to revise the status quo.

5) The challenge for Washington is to rebuild a rimland order that is suited to an age when power runs through both networks and territory. This means not only keeping hostile armies behind their borders but also keeping heartland autocracies from hijacking globalization. A modern rimland strategy must fuse the loose web of coalitions into a system that governs interdependence, strengthens free societies, and protects against coercion. Only the United States can lead this new order, but to do so, it must resist its own inward, illiberal reflexes. Otherwise, the heartland will rewire the world for its own ends.

6) For centuries, autocratic states have sought to consolidate the world's largest landmass against maritime coalitions that try to keep Eurasian power fractured and contained. The most recent of these clashes, the Cold War, was the purest version of this pattern. The Soviet Union was a hulking land power with an empire that stretched from Germany to the Pacific. Soviet armies and subversion were constant threats to the Eurasian

margins. The United States answered by forging ocean-bridging alliances to secure Eurasia's dynamic peripheries, especially Western Europe, East Asia, and, later, the Middle East. It isolated Moscow's heartland empire militarily, politically, and technologically and integrated friendly countries into a free-world economy with trade routes and supply lines secured by American power. This rimland coalition contained the hostile heartland until it crumbled. It created a new global architecture of power dominated by democracies, and it is again under threat.

7) A new team of Eurasian autocracies is now vying for primacy. A neoimperial China aims for supremacy across Asia and beyond. A vengeful Russia seeks to overturn the European security order and reclaim its role as a heartland superpower. A weakened but still ambitious Iran clashes violently with Washington and its allies in the Middle East. A provocative North Korea bolsters its ambitions in Northeast Asia with far-reaching military capabilities. Collectively, these revisionists occupy huge swaths of the Eurasian supercontinent. They are all driven by intense hostility to the power and democratic purpose of the rimland world. As they cooperate more closely, they revive the nightmare of a Eurasian axis that colludes against its foes.

8) These autocracies are deepening their economic, financial, and technological ties. Chinese microchips and machine tools now underpin the Russian economy, and Chinese money and technology are helping Russia develop the Arctic. Russian companies raise money in Hong Kong, and Russian oil flows to Beijing. The regimes in Moscow and Tehran have cooperated to expand the International North-South Transport Corridor, which connects Russia to Asia via the Caspian Sea and Iran.

9) This autocratic power combination extends to the military realm. Iranian drones, North Korean missiles and troops, and Chinese dual-use goods (which can be used for both military and civilian purposes) have sustained Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. Russia sells advanced military tools, including high-end air and missile defenses and lethal submarine-quieting technology, which turbocharge the dangers posed by Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Their coordinated production of drones, missiles, helicopters, and other capabilities is creating an increasingly integrated military-industrial bloc committed to shattering the rimland order. Tehran used a Chinese-built spy satellite and Beijing-based satellite stations to surveil and strike U.S. bases in the Middle East during its war with Washington. Chinese networks supplied Iran with missile-fuel precursors, and Russian targeting data aided Iranian attacks.

10) The political geographer Halford Mackinder warned at the turn of the twentieth century that heartland aggressors would use mastery over Eurasia to embark on global offensives. Amid the vicious combat of World War II, the political scientist Nicholas Spykman argued that the United States must hold the globe in balance by keeping Eurasia's vital, amphibious rimlands secure. Both thinkers would recognize today's contours of conflict. Yet the present challenge is more nuanced and pernicious than those that came before.

11) The Eurasian axis is not a unitary empire of the sort the Soviets aspired to run, nor is it a full-fledged alliance. It is a syndicate of sanctioned regimes bound mostly by shared grievance. The Leninist party-state in Beijing, the neofascist regime in Moscow, the family racket in Pyongyang, and the militant theocracy in Tehran share little ideology beyond a common hatred for their rimland rivals. They are not pursuing one collective global revolution but distinct and ultimately divergent imperial projects rooted in each country's history and traditions. Today, China and Russia are strategic partners that, in Chinese leader Xi Jinping's words, fight "back to back" against the liberal, U.S.-led world. But they may soon discover that they both cannot dominate the Arctic, Central Asia, and other places where their visions of greatness collide.

12) This limits heartland solidarity. China's and Russia's responses to the Iran war showed the pattern clearly: they were willing to help Tehran with intelligence and military-technological aid but not willing to risk a wider clash by coming directly to Iran's defense. Likewise, when U.S. commandos seized Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January, Beijing and Moscow sent little more than hopes and prayers. These are transactional partners, not allies committed to a common defense.

13) Yet this dynamic also minimizes the risk of an ideological meltdown. Rather than bicker over questions of orthodoxy and heresy, revisionist powers can focus on the strategic transactionalism—trade, sanctions proofing, military-technological cooperation—that fortifies them against common foes. The heartland powers' effective absence of ideology helps them avoid isolation by enabling flexible partnerships with anti-American autocracies in Belarus, Cambodia, Cuba, and Myanmar; ambivalent swing states such as India and Saudi Arabia; and developing countries that are dissatisfied with a world dominated by the West.

14) None of today's revisionists can simply smash Eurasia, as their predecessors did. Russia has moved at less than a snail's pace in subjugating eastern Ukraine. China would struggle against the barriers to conquering Taiwan, as long as that island enjoys Washington's protection.

Yet this weakness also makes Beijing appear less existentially menacing to countries beyond its immediate reach, complicating U.S. efforts at containment. And today's Eurasian autocrats boast assets their forebears lacked—namely, the ability to disrupt the alliances that bind rimland states to Washington and even to strike at the offshore superpower itself.

15) Chinese and Russian cyber attacks threaten critical U.S. infrastructure and could immobilize the United States in a crisis. In 2021, a Chinese cyber-espionage group dubbed “Volt Typhoon” was compromising critical American infrastructure, including water utilities and energy grids. That same year, Russian hackers shut down the flow of fuel in the Colonial Pipeline in the eastern United States, creating gasoline shortages. Beijing's and Moscow's antisatellite capabilities jeopardize the military communications infrastructure that lets the Pentagon project power globally. Vast arsenals of missiles and other precision-guided munitions give China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea the power to unleash devastation on U.S. partners—and to bloody U.S. forces that might rush to their rescue. In March, an Iranian drone and missile barrage damaged U.S. aircraft at an air base in Saudi Arabia. Tehran hit U.S. diplomatic and military facilities from Jordan to Bahrain, underscoring how even a weak revisionist state can menace the United States' far-flung bases. That's just a preview of what might await Washington in the western Pacific: Beijing now boasts the largest ground-based missile force in the world.

16) Growing nuclear arsenals—paired, in China's case, with delivery systems such as hypersonic glide vehicles that can evade defenses—can further raise the price of U.S. intervention by threatening coercive strikes against U.S. bases or the homeland. By the mid-2030s, Washington will face nuclear peers with revisionist aims at both ends of the supercontinent. Although the United States' foes can't conduct a new Eurasian blitzkrieg, they have the tools to fracture rival coalitions and to facilitate local aggression—around Taiwan or the Baltic Sea, for instance—that tilts the military balance in rimland regions.

17) Then there are the economic tools of heartland coercion. China can choke its rivals by cutting off rare earths—it mines roughly 60 percent of the world's supply and processes more than 80 percent—as well as electric vehicle batteries or pharmaceutical precursor chemicals. It has also made a generational effort to insert itself in the arteries of globalization—telecommunications networks, undersea cables, trade and shipping companies—as a source of strategic strength.

18) Russia has similarly used energy flows and transnational corruption to divide and weaken Europe. It employs advanced technology,

opaque cross-border financial flows, and the free media and accessible political systems of open societies to subvert democracies. Beijing and Moscow have sometimes worked together or in parallel in support of this divisive agenda: the combination of Chinese money and Russian meddling has effectively driven wedges within the European rimland by empowering illiberal actors and fomenting ethnic nationalism in the Balkans.

19) These powers make twenty-first-century connectivity a weapon in the enduring struggle for influence. And no revisionist state mixes historical ambition with modern methods as much as China.

20) In 1904, Mackinder warned that a stable, ruthlessly run China could one day imperil “the world’s freedom,” because it combined rimland frontage with a vast Eurasian hinterland. In 1942, Spykman predicted that a “modern, vitalized, and militarized China” might command the western Pacific and become a “continental power of huge dimensions.” The great minds of geopolitics have long feared Eurasian giants that can expand in two directions. They did not imagine that Beijing would reach for greatness in three.

21) Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative revives the old logic of Eurasian consolidation, binding the supercontinent through infrastructure, dependence, and debt. All told, BRI outlays probably exceed \$1 trillion, mostly in loans that give Beijing leverage as the world’s biggest debt collector. Political influence and security ties follow: the string of ports Beijing has invested in, stretching from Thailand to Greece, could one day become the backbone of a global basing network. Ensuring access to Eurasian real estate and resources, whether Middle Eastern oil or Southeast Asian nickel, would make the supercontinent a Chinese stronghold—and a platform for expansion or coercion on a global scale.

22) China also means to blast through the rimland’s maritime barrier. For decades, Beijing has been building an antinavy navy—an arsenal of antiship missiles, air defenses, and quiet submarines meant to lock U.S. vessels out of the western Pacific. In recent years, Xi has increasingly emphasized power-projection forces—such as a far-reaching navy with multiple aircraft carriers—that can bring Chinese influence into the open Pacific. The scale of this oceanic offensive is astounding: China’s navy is now the world’s largest by number of ships, and its coast guard dwarfs rival Asian fleets. Its doctrine of military-civil fusion allows it to tap into a shipbuilding industry that produces more than the rest of the world combined.

23) China’s third offensive is in the cloud. Influence in the twenty-first century comes from ruling digital networks as much as ruling key geography, and progress on Beijing’s Digital Silk Road is well advanced.

Chinese surveillance gear is used on every continent. The Chinese companies Alipay and WeChat Pay lead the digital payments industry, servicing merchants in dozens of countries and currencies. U.S. sanctions have not stopped Chinese giants such as Huawei from surging in the 5G and 6G telecommunications race. Chinese AI models, including DeepSeek and Qwen, have broad appeal, especially in developing countries. Underpinning this campaign are China's efforts to control the materials, from semiconductors to rare earths, that make those technologies and networks run.

24) Washington's rimland coalition has led the world for decades. Today, it is being tested in every domain. The most urgent task for the United States is brutally simple: shore up military barriers to prevent heartland breakthroughs that could destabilize the status quo and enable greater gains down the line. Deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan requires more forward-deployed U.S. and allied combat power: long-range fires, submarines and surface ships, fifth-generation aircraft, integrated air and missile defenses, legions of aerial and maritime drones, and bases and weapons stockpiles dispersed across the so-called first island chain, the arc of islands that runs through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. In Europe, deterring Russia means turning NATO's eastern flank into a hard target, with permanent or persistent heavy forces, deep-strike and air defense networks, counter drone capabilities, and resilient critical infrastructure from the Baltics to Poland and Romania. Effective deterrence also calls for a steady stream of arms for Ukraine.

25) For now, this task falls overwhelmingly on the United States and select frontline countries. Only Washington has the full suite of tools that make a high-end coalition defense viable. Although the most vigorous and vulnerable U.S. allies are rapidly rearming—especially the Baltic states, Finland, Germany, Japan, Poland, and Taiwan—the rimland rear has spent three decades demilitarizing and underinvesting in even basic capabilities. The heavy lifting will have to be done by U.S. forces and a thin forward line of local militaries, with the rest of the rimland offering sanctions, funding, and rear-area support.

26) U.S. President Donald Trump is right that allies should spend more on defense and contribute more to the common industrial base. But he is wrong to pair that pressure with his persistent yearning for American disengagement. If the United States flees Eurasia, the remaining rimland states will not be able to contain Beijing or even Moscow. Washington must show, through increased defense spending and forward deployments, that it will stand with those that stand up for themselves.

27) But shoring up local military capabilities is only the first move in a long contest. Recent wars have demonstrated how quickly supplies of shells, missiles, air defenses, and basic materiel dwindle—not in months but in weeks or days—and how decisive industrial output becomes once the shooting starts. A frontline deterrent could blunt the opening blows of a conflict in Europe or the western Pacific, but it could not, on its own, sustain a multiyear struggle in which production capacity, technological depth, and financial resilience determine which side bends first. That is where the broader rimland coalition comes in, because even Washington cannot indefinitely underwrite multiple major theaters while replenishing its own forces. The task, then, is to transform a dispersed collection of wealthy, anxious states into a functioning war-and-peace economy—a bloc that deters aggression in the near term and outproduces, out innovates, and outlasts the heartland over time.

28) Despite Western defeatism, the rimland dwarfs the heartland in all meaningful measures of economic capacity. North America, the eurozone, and the major Indo-Pacific democracies of Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan produce roughly half of global GDP at market exchange rates. The maximalist heartland, by contrast—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, plus a clutch of aligned states such as Belarus, Cambodia, Cuba, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics—reaches only about 20 percent of global GDP. Even that figure is likely inflated: satellite-based research that measures nighttime light, a proxy for economic activity, suggests that China, Russia, and other authoritarian states overstated their growth rates by roughly 35 percent in the first two decades of this century.

29) The rimland also controls the core engines of global wealth creation. North America, the eurozone, and the major Indo-Pacific democracies form a consumer market roughly three and a half times the size of the heartland's; the U.S. market alone is nearly twice the size of China's and Russia's combined. That imbalance shapes global trade flows, with more than half of all world trade occurring within the rimland and roughly two-thirds of heartland exports depending on rimland demand, as the economist Neil Shearing has shown. By contrast, only about one-sixth of rimland exports rely on heartland markets.

30) Members of the U.S.-aligned bloc issue the world's reserve currencies, run the main payment and transaction networks, and supply nearly all liquid, investment-grade assets. Roughly 85 percent of global foreign direct investment, 85 percent of portfolio investment, and 87 percent of foreign exchange reserves sit inside the bloc. These foundations give the rimland both lower borrowing costs in normal times and formidable coercive

leverage in crises. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the G-7 froze \$300 billion in Russian reserves and ejected Russian banks from the financial communications network known as SWIFT, forcing Moscow into financial dependence on China. During the Iran war, Washington sanctioned Tehran's weapons networks and shadow fleet of oil tankers and warned that banks handling illicit Iranian funds could be cut off from the U.S. financial system. China operates within this same system; about 75 percent of its overseas lending is dollar denominated, and most of its nondollar reserves are held in Europe.

31) Resources are another rimland strength. The United States has become the world's dominant producer of oil and gas, pumping roughly twice as much petroleum as Saudi Arabia or Russia and about 75 percent more natural gas than Russia, the second-place producer. That abundance has sharply reduced U.S. exposure to far-flung chokepoints: only about seven percent of the crude oil that the United States imports comes through the Strait of Hormuz, whereas roughly half of China's crude oil imports do. Meanwhile, North America went from being a marginal supplier of liquefied natural gas in 2016 to becoming the world's top exporting region in 2025. That shift has made the rimland more self-reliant. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow supplied 45 percent of EU gas imports; by 2025, that share had fallen to 12 percent. Russia's attempt to weaponize oil and gas did not leave Europe helpless but instead pushed the continent deeper into a U.S.-centered energy system. The Iran war has accelerated the trend. Roughly two months after the conflict began, U.S. crude oil exports hit a record 6.4 million barrels per day, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Earlier in April, more than 65 empty supertankers—nearly triple the number in the week before the war began—were heading for U.S. ports to load crude. U.S. refineries were also expected to supply more than one-third of Europe's jet fuel in April, roughly double the January level.

32) The heartland has natural resources, too, but the rimland has a greater ability to translate resources into power. Russia sits on vast oil, gas, and mineral deposits, but many of them depend on outdated Soviet-era pipelines, overstretched rail networks, and ports and shipping lanes that are vulnerable to attack. In April, Ukrainian strikes on major export hubs forced Russia to cut its oil flows, exposing the fragile infrastructure beneath its resource power. China's edge in critical minerals is more formidable but less secure than it looks. Its chokehold is now being attacked across the supply chain, as U.S. and allied countries' diversification efforts have shifted from aspiration to state-backed mobilization. Tokyo pioneered this model in 2010, after tensions with China over the disputed Senkaku Islands (known in China

as the Diaoyu Islands) led China to embargo all exports of rare-earth elements to Japan. Since then, Tokyo has leveraged public finance to connect Australian mining and Malaysian refining to Japan's downstream magnet industry, cutting its dependence on Chinese rare-earth imports from roughly 90 percent in 2010 to around 60 percent today. Washington is now scaling that approach, by using equity stakes, price floors, and new financing mechanisms to spur rare-earth production, and creating a state-owned U.S. Strategic Critical Minerals Reserve. Companies across the rimland, including MP Materials in the United States, Lynas in Australia, and Serra Verde in Brazil, are building a mine-to-magnet chain. China can still cause pain, but its threats to cut off access only accelerate the consolidation of rimland supply chains.

33) The most decisive asymmetry lies in advanced industry. The United States and its allies capture nearly 85 percent of global corporate profits in high-tech industries—the clearest indicator of where genuine value is created—according to calculations by Stephen Brooks and Ben Vagle. China's share is around six percent; Russia, Iran, and North Korea contribute virtually nothing. In 2022, American companies led 20 of the 27 industries listed in Forbes' Global 2000, which ranks the world's largest public companies, and the United States never ranked below third in any industry. China led in only three: banking, construction, and raw materials extraction. In the sectors that matter most for modern power, U.S. and allied dominance is overwhelming; as Brooks and Vagle show, in 2022 the United States and its partners captured 99 percent of profits in aerospace, 96 percent in semiconductors, 90 percent in tech hardware, 85 percent in software, and more than 75 percent in biotech, telecom, chemicals, and capital goods. China's share of profits in each of these categories ranged from one percent to seven percent.

34) China's industrial scale is real: it produces about a third of global goods, and it leads output in electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, drones, ships, pharmaceuticals, and rare earths. But scale has not produced self-sufficiency. China's domestic production of chips covers less than one-fifth of demand, and U.S. export controls have sharply reduced China's access to high-end computing power. Even China's best AI models rely on open-source architectures designed in the West or patched-together clusters of low-end chips. The underlying picture is unchanged: China is a mid-tech manufacturing giant operating within a rimland frontier-tech ecosystem.

35) The rimland is not only larger and more advanced than the heartland; it is also diverse enough to operate as a self-contained global economy. The heartland, by contrast, remains a narrower coalition built

around concentrated industries and fragile states. China and Russia have tried to compensate by cultivating partners outside both blocs, especially through loans and investment. But many of Beijing's big borrowers are heavily indebted commodity exporters with B-minus credit ratings, and its overseas lending has generated negative net transfers since 2019 as borrowers' defaults have mounted. These asymmetries matter in times of peace and war. In normal times, rimland firms set standards, control critical intellectual property, and capture the high-margin segments of global value chains. In conflict, those same networks become chokepoints the rimland can squeeze; high-end chips, precision tools, and other irreplaceable inputs cannot be stockpiled indefinitely or domesticated quickly. Today's heartland is more dynamic and connected than past adversaries, but it still lacks the economic depth and technological reach of the coalition arrayed against it.

36) And yet the rimland's great strength—its diversity—is also a weakness. A coalition that resembles a miniature global economy brings together states whose policies are motivated by very different vulnerabilities and risk tolerances. China inspires fear in India through aggression in the Himalayas, in Japan and Southeast Asia through maritime expansion, and in Australia through economic coercion. Russian missiles and energy shocks worry European countries. The heartland, on the other hand, has a simple, unifying aim: weaken the rimland order that constrains it.

37) Rimland powers also rely on a group of hinge states that are strategically indispensable yet structurally uncommitted. India cultivates close partnerships with both Washington and Moscow. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its defense ties to the United States while keeping Huawei embedded in its digital infrastructure. These countries have the resources, technological strengths, or other assets that can bolster rimland dominance, but they remain only quasi allies whose commitment is contingent at best.

38) Inside the rimland's Western core, democratic politics magnify coordination problems. Exporters, import-dependent industries, and ordinary citizens accustomed to cheap energy and goods make it difficult for politicians to take harder lines on China and Russia. Europe has a weak tech sector and lagging productivity, and its industries are exposed to both Chinese overcapacity and U.S. protectionism. Such structural limits push democratic allies toward hedging and delay. The United States, meanwhile, is indispensable but unreliable. Domestic polarization and cycles of populism feed unilateralist foreign policy impulses; economic heft encourages the belief that the country can prosper without careful alliance management or perhaps even extort those allies for narrow gains. During the Cold War, a nuclear-armed, ideologically expansionist Soviet Union imposed discipline on

the rimland system. Today's heartland does not: Russia is brutal but limited, and China advances through economic coercion and gradual "gray zone" pressure—maritime harassment, military intimidation, cyber-operations, and other coercive actions designed to shift facts on the ground without triggering war. Without a singular existential danger, the rimland lacks the fear that once forced democracies to subordinate parochial interests to shared strategy. It is materially dominant but politically weak.

39) The task is not to widen the rimland but to make it coherent. This means shifting from ad hoc coordination to more structured collaboration—shared production in key industries, interoperable technology networks, and defense industries that reinforce one another rather than operate in isolation.

40) The organizing principle is simple: redundancy without autarky. The rimland does not need to produce everything everywhere; it needs to ensure that every essential industrial and technological capability exists somewhere in the coalition. Instead of building one giant supply chain, the bloc should distribute critical functions across North American, European, and Indo-Pacific economies. Partners would follow common rules for investment screening, export controls, and countering Chinese overcapacity, so that private capital could flow naturally toward allied hubs rather than Chinese or Russian chokepoints.

41) This same logic applies to technology. The rimland's historical advantage is decentralized innovation: many independent centers of expertise compete, experiment, and scale breakthroughs faster than any state-driven rival. A coherent strategy would amplify that advantage, linking R & D ecosystems, coordinating restrictions on dual-use technologies, and ensuring that sensitive advances in AI, quantum, and biotech circulate within the coalition without leaking into heartland militaries.

42) This system also needs a cohesive defense industrial base. Today, allied militaries train together, but their factories often operate as if in different worlds. A stronger rimland would knit those bases into a networked defense economy that promotes the joint production of munitions and platforms and fortifies the undersea cables that anchor global finance and military command. The goal is a massive and distributed defense base: different states specializing in areas in which they are strongest but with interoperable outputs that reinforce collective strength.

43) This would achieve greater military staying power. A distributed defense industrial system—spread across North America, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific—would create surge capacity that no single antagonist could disable. It would also allow allies to distribute pressure: when one region's

stockpiles ran low or its factories were hit by cyberattacks, others could compensate. In this way, the rimland's economic and technological advantages could turn a coalition that is tactically exposed into one with strategic stamina.

44) This economic and military integration must be paired with tools for coercion. If China or Russia targeted one member with trade restrictions, willing partners could unleash synchronized tariffs, export controls, and emergency financial support. A permanent coordination board could calibrate penalties, enforce tech-security rules, and compensate states hit by retaliation. Instead of improvising responses, the bloc would rely on rehearsed tools and predictable escalation ladders that raise the costs of heartland aggression.

45) Closing China's backdoors is equally crucial. The U.S.-led coalition controls the machinery of modern industry, but only by coordinating rules of origin and content tracking can it prevent Beijing from routing critical inputs through India, Mexico, or Vietnam. Harmonized export controls and embedded geolocation standards would keep dual-use machinery from slipping into heartland militaries. A tiered system, with full access for compliant states, partial access for fence sitters, and suspension for violators, would anchor a flexible but disciplined order.

46) None of this requires a formal alliance. Treaties are cumbersome, and unanimity creates veto players. What the rimland needs are aligned rules and coordinated enforcement, not shared sovereignty. Groups of willing states can move ahead on chips, undersea cables, long-range fires, or sanctions even when others hesitate. The system expands by accretion, not by grand bargains.

47) Nor should the rimland romanticize winning over the so-called global South. During the Cold War, most postcolonial states chose nonalignment, and the Western coalition prevailed anyway. That basic reality still holds. The U.S. economy alone is roughly 30 percent larger than the economies in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia combined. Countries in those regions are politically and economically divided. Many are tempted by China's lending and infrastructure but threatened by its industrial overcapacity and dumping. Developing regions will likely remain an arena of shifting case-by-case alignments, not a reliable coalition for Washington or Beijing.

48) For the rimland, the implication is simple. It must engage with countries in these regions opportunistically, not ideologically. What the coalition needs from these countries is specific and limited: secure access to critical minerals, diversified energy supplies, and complementary labor

pools. Partnerships with them will remain transactional and fluid. The goal is not to convert them into allies but to offer credible economic alternatives when interests align and to ensure that China cannot dominate their markets or lock up resources at low cost.

49) All of this will require steady U.S. leadership of the sort that is in question today. The United States has its own continentalist impulses. As the world's strongest, most self-sufficient country, it may be tempted to pull back to its home region, using hemispheric dominance as a refuge in a disordered world. Or it could seek unilateral advantage by coercing its allies, rather than working to generate greater multilateral strength. Either impulse would prove fatal to rimland cohesion.

50) Only the United States can anchor the defense of endangered rimland regions with the economic weight and technological primacy to underpin a system of collective resilience and pressure. Only the United States can backstop the confidence partners need to take a stand against heartland coercion. Only the United States can be the central node in the network of flexible partnerships that will enable the rimland to out innovate and outlast its foes. If Washington uses pressure and persuasion to catalyze collective action, as it did during the Cold War, it can fortify vital relationships. If it discards those relationships or uses them to extort tribute, it will bulldoze the barriers that have long impeded heartland aggression.

51) The heartland knows what it wants: a world carved into territorial spheres and controlled through industrial chokepoints that keep others dependent. With superior technology and richer markets, the rimland has the scale to stop that future. But those advantages mean little if they aren't organized. The question now is whether the rimland will act as a coherent center of power or remain a loose, vulnerable assemblage. The underlying balance of power still leans decisively in the rimland's favor. Whether the international order does as well will depend on whether the rimland can turn strength into strategy.