

GEOPOLITICS

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1. Concept

Geopolitics is a widely used term with various meanings and a decidedly checkered past. Technically the derivation of the term comes from joining Geo or Gaia, the Greek goddess of the earth, and Polis the self-governing city of Greek antiquity. Literally then it is about the political organization of the earth at the largest of scales. Sometimes the term is used as a synonym for political geography or the spatial dimensions of politics. In other uses it refers to international great power rivalries, the geographical factors in a state's foreign policy, and sometimes more specifically to struggles for strategic control over specific areas of the earth's surface. Geopolitical has also been used as an adjectival synonym for international politics that emphasizes high politics and military matters in specific contexts. In political debate the slippage between these meanings has sometimes been a very useful rhetorical device suggesting simultaneously intellectual acumen and political gravitas.

As such the term is used in a number of ways that are not always consistent and which frequently involve very considerable variation in the assumptions that are implicit in the use of the term. In the past it related to claims by many thinkers that there are long-term geographical patterns to world politics. More recently it loosely specifies the geographical dimensions of politics at the largest scale. Geopolitics thus refers to global politics, but also to specific ways of studying global politics and the knowledge practices that make such designations of the world possible in the first place. It is about space, power and knowledge on the planetary scale. But it is also very much about changes in political arrangements and the shifting representations of power in the modern world. The scholarly study of geopolitics is now also about investigating the modes of geopolitical reasoning which facilitate the division and control of political space and the administration of resources, peoples and environments at the largest of scales.

2. History of "Geopolitics"

Not surprisingly the term geopolitics has often been related in some ways to the academic discipline of geography but many important writers and politicians who have used the term have not been formally trained as geographers. Credit for coining the specific term "Geopolitics" is usually given to Rudolf Kjellen, a late nineteenth Swedish political scientist and conservative politician heavily influenced by German sources and especially Friedrich Ratzel's *Politische Geographie* published first in 1897. Ratzel's important analogy of the state as an organism, when linked to Darwinian ideas of the struggle of the fittest, suggested that international politics was a struggle for "living space" and implied that larger states would better survive and do so at the expense of smaller and weaker ones. These themes were often linked to contemporaneous ideas of environmental determinism which argued that specific environmental factors determine the course of human affairs. These ideas were in turn linked to the themes of imperialism and imperial rivalries to set the context for much of the geopolitical writing of the early part of the twentieth century.

Arguably the most important proponent of what subsequently came to be known as geopolitics was the British geographer, Halford J. Mackinder, although he himself disliked the term and avoided its usage. Kjellen's writings emphasized German thinking and ignored Mackinder, but nonetheless the term has subsequently been linked closely with Mackinder's legacy. Mackinder argued that by the beginning of the twentieth century political space was closed, allowing for no further expansion of imperial powers. Hence he suggested that in future rivalries could not find outlets in further colonial expansion. Mackinder's 1904 lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London, on "The Geographical Pivot of History" postulated a key "pivot" (later renamed "the Heartland") area on the earth's surface in central Asia. With the coming of railways and hence rapid overland communications, he argued, the pivot would allow its occupier to dominate the landmass of Asia and hence the world.

It's not difficult to see these arguments as a continuation of the "great game" of nineteenth century imperial rivalry between Russia and Britain in Asia. But written in the shadow of declining British imperial hegemony in the early twentieth century this paper, and Mackinder's later book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, published in the

aftermath of the First World War, also picked up the theme of the global struggle of landpower and seapower. This theme had been written about by very influential American naval strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, in the late nineteenth century in *The Influence of Seapower on History*.

After the First World War, and stimulated by many Germans' sense of the injustice of the Versailles treaty provisions which reduced German territory, many of the geopolitical ideas were developed in Germany. Most prominent was Karl Haushofer who adopted Kjellen's term "*Geopolitik*" and Ratzel's notions of *lebensraum* to provide a framework for an "applied science" suitable, he argued, for analyzing the regional contexts and foreign policies of states. A prolific writer, and editor of the political journal *Zeitschrift fur Geopolitik*, which often advocated the return of territory lost after the First World War, his connections, through friendship with Rudolf Hess, to the Nazi party ensured considerable use of his geopolitical ideas for Nazi propaganda purposes. The *Zeitschrift* spawned emulators elsewhere in Europe like the Italian *Geopolitica*. The emphasis in Haushofer's writings on military matters was also picked up in South America where national security doctrine, and specifically the emphasis on effective military control of national territory, has often since been discussed in terms of geopolitics. However, many facets of the Nazi war strategy, and the invasion of Russia in 1941 in particular, went against Haushofer's geopolitical ideas of a continental alliance in opposition to what he understood as naval-based British global power.

Nonetheless American wartime propaganda in particular suggested that geopolitics was the key to Nazi plans for world domination and American writers quickly adopted some of the motifs of geopolitical analysis to reconsider American wartime strategy and post-war foreign policy. Notably Nicholas Spykman, who taught International Affairs at Yale University, modified Mackinder's Heartland theory to emphasize the importance of the global contest between landpower and seapower in the Asian "rimlands". The post-war foreign policy of containment had many of the hallmarks of Spykman's rimland theory and the struggle between naval and land power, although George Kennan, the author of the term containment, didn't use either the term geopolitics or rimland in his formulations of the policy.

The term geopolitics was, however, tainted with associations with Nazi uses of the term *Geopolitik*, and while some of the themes of classical geopolitics continued to be discussed, the term itself fell into relative disuse. Instead, after the Second World War, terms like "national security", "containment" and "deterrence" were linked to geographical descriptions of the Soviet bloc and the Atlantic alliance in the rapidly expanding field of international relations, which provided the Western experts who dominated the discussions of global politics and strategic studies. In the communist world, "geopolitics" was equated with Nazi and capitalist imperialism and used only as a term of polemical derision. With the exception of a few writers such as Saul Cohen, political geography analyses of global politics languished and, outside South America, the term "geopolitics" was used rarely, even when explicitly geographical factors were taken seriously in discussions of strategy and foreign policy.

In the 1970s the use of the term "geopolitics" and its analytical importance in strategic discourse were revived. The popularization of the term is usually linked with Henry

Kissinger's use of the word in the 1970s but he has been careful to avoid defining it beyond claiming that it relates to equilibrium among major powers. The term was linked to concerns with "Soviet expansionism" in the late 1970s in the United States amid discussions of "arcs of crisis" in the Middle East and the declaration of the Carter doctrine designed to forestall Soviet military involvements in the Persian Gulf. Colin Gray, a strategist of considerable influence in the late 1970s debates on SALT arms agreements and an advisor to the Reagan administration, revived the ideas of Mackinder and Spykman in a number of essays, and linked their ideas directly to the formulation of American nuclear strategy during the period of the second Cold War.

Geopolitics is now a respected term in international political discussion relating to matters of international rivalry in general but to many other large questions of world order too. Linked to discussion of the future, publications such as *The Economist* published major discussions of the future of global politics under the rubric of geopolitics in the 1990s. The term "geopolitics" is now also being used -- ironically, given the former Soviet denigration of the term -- in Russia, in a way that links directly to concerns over Russian state power and control over other states in Europe and Asia. Control over the "near abroad", the Commonwealth of Independent States that emerged after the demise of the Soviet Union, and concern about the wider context of Russian security have now been reinvented in Moscow in terms of geography, stability and spatial control on Russia's borders.

3. Conceptual Difficulties

Partly in reaction to the developments in the 1970s and 1980s, political geographers in the English speaking world once again turned their attention to matters of global power in its geographical context and once again discussed at least some of these matters under the rubric of "geopolitics". But in most cases these writers, unlike their forbears early in the century, were now much more critical of state policies, and did not aspire to give the practitioners of statecraft advice of a kind designed to lead to state aggrandizement. Simultaneously in France in the 1970s Yves Lacoste and other authors associated with the journal *Herodote* reinvented the term as an analytical focus to examine the global operation of political power in specific places. But they, too, did so in a manner that avoided giving policy advice to specific national political elites.

Part of the reason for these new critical developments was concern about the dangers of Cold War confrontation and a recognition that many of the elements of the global crisis were interconnected with political structures of the Cold War. Within geography, geopolitics is now understood in relation to wider concerns with poverty, underdevelopment, violence, militarization and environmental degradation. In addition, geography as a discipline was influenced in the 1970s by materialist approaches to social science. Drawing on broader literature in political economy, and in the case of leading practitioner Peter Taylor, specifically world system theory, the economic dimensions of global politics were worked into reconsiderations of the geographical dimensions of global politics. This critical distancing from the tradition of giving advice on state policy led to a re-evaluation of geopolitics, its connections as a mode of reasoning to state power, and the methods of scholarship appropriate for its study.

Most recently some scholars, influenced by critical and post-structuralist theorizing both in international relations and, more widely, in social sciences and cultural studies, have analyzed the discourses of contemporary international politics and the geographical assumptions informing policy under the rubric of "critical geopolitics". The use of the oxymoron is intentional to signal that the supposed fixed arrangements of geography are now understood as being temporary social constructions of space that will change as political, economic and technical forces lead to spatial reorganization. A major work by John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge in the mid 1990s developed the themes of critical geopolitics in a synthesis that analyses traditional geopolitical concerns with great power rivalry and links them to an examination of global political economy and the use of geo-economic discourses as part of a series of practices used by practitioners of statecraft to "master space".

The engagement with critical social theory in the 1990s, and the enlargement of concern to include broader matters of political economy have raised crucial matters of the definition of precisely what constitutes geopolitics. The implications of this are that the geographical assumptions implicit in reasoning about the world, and its political arrangements, are crucial both to what is taken for granted in contemporary thinking and how political alternatives can be conceptualized. The world political map can no longer be taken for granted as the backdrop or context for human activities. Its construction, legitimization and reproduction are now understood as unavoidably political acts which have important consequences for how what is possible in the future is understood.

This is much more than a scholastic debate; it has profound implications for how contemporary global politics is designated and understood, and goes to the heart of discussions of the future and the possibilities of sustainable societies in a global context. Key to this discussion is the suggestion, implicit in most contemporary scholarship, and especially explicit in John Agnew's analyses, that narrowly defined geopolitics is effectively a subset of a much larger knowledge system that can be called, in Agnew's terms, a Eurocentric "geopolitical vision".

4. Geopolitical Vision

European geopolitical vision is first and foremost literally a way of seeing the world. As John Agnew puts it on page 2 of his key book *Geopolitics*, "The world is actively 'spatialized,' divided up, labeled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser 'importance' by political geographers, other academics and political leaders. This process provides the geographical framing within which political elites and mass publics act in the world in pursuit of their own identities and interests". These processes did not just appear suddenly. They are a long cumulative process whereby, over the last few centuries, European knowledges of the world developed as exploration and science gradually elaborated and modified religious specifications of the universe, and Europeans' place in the cosmos.

They also related to the emergence of "single point perspective" representation in art where what is within the frame of the picture is comprehended from a single point of view. While this is now so taken for granted, the camera's view of the world being part and parcel of contemporary culture in many places, it is important to note that its

emergence marks a cosmological shift, away from theological modes of reasoning in Christendom towards what would eventually become a modern scientific view, literally, of the world. It is a view that allows visualization of places, peoples and events beyond the practical experience of everyday life. Thus it is a specific cultural mode of understanding, representing, categorizing and creating knowledge of the world -- one that has expanded across the world in the last half millennium as European power and influence spread.

Especially important in the development of a European vision were the encounters with “non- peoples”, the civilizations of Asia and the Americas who could construct the category of other, alien and different, in contrast to Christian identities, in a process that actually made it possible to conceive of oneself as European. The Renaissance rediscovery of Ptolemy's world map in Europe, which had synthesized classical Greek and Roman knowledge of the world, left large parts of the world blank, or "*terra incognita*". These blank spaces were "filled in" by cartographers with gradually more precise knowledge as European exploration and conquest spread the impact of European modes of life and brought information back to the scientists and map-makers of Europe and subsequently North America.

Circumnavigation and exploration gradually produced a view of the world as a unity that could be represented cartographically within a single image. The world map and the spinning globe are standard icons of our world, but they are a relatively new invention, a modern way of knowing that provides the context for considering politics as a global phenomenon, and a way of seeing the world that has distinct implications for how various modern "we's" understand their place in the larger scheme of things. When the territorial boundaries of states and colonies are placed on the map and the appropriate coloring schemes affixed, a familiar pattern of coding spaces emerges; states are assumed to be roughly equal, their spaces precisely defined. Geography in all its complexity is reduced to a number of apparently transparent categories with which the whole world can be classified, known and mastered.

But related to this is also the matter of danger as distant and threatening. The local is familiar and safe; the distant is strange and threatening. What is unseen in the pictorial representation of the world is dangerous, dark, literally not enlightened. The unknown parts of Ptolemy's map were a challenge to discovery, but also where the monsters might still live. Mediaeval bestiaries lived on for many centuries in the fringes of cartographers' world maps. Vision is about clarity, knowledge and control. What is *terra incognita* is potentially dangerous, in need of exploration and conquest to render it safe and secure, known and familiar, catalogued and surveyed.

But while the globe is a single place, how it was to be divided up, organized and administered was highly fraught. In the processes of European rivalry, the colonization of non-European spaces frequently led to bloodshed, both between Europeans and between Europeans and indigenous inhabitants. The colonization and exploration of the world thus constructed the world as an object of knowledge that could be catalogued, categorized and divided up. Possession of colonies also became part of the rivalries between imperial states. Principles of territorial rule crystallized out of the claims by absolutist monarchs to property and lands in Europe and further afield as numerous

treaties and agreements following on from the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, where the Pope took it upon himself to divide the world between Portugal and Spain.

The European vision of the world implies a view from nowhere, an overarching conception of the world that is neutral and objective. But it has always been a view that is related to European interests in ruling and appropriating resources. Implicit in the designations of cartographic entities is some form of a hierarchy of places, some of which are more important than others. European states are of primary significance, colonies abroad of secondary concern. Frequently such designations were related to temporal specifications. "Here" is modern, advanced and civilized. "There" is backward, undeveloped and primitive. Temporal qualities are frequently imposed on spaces in ways that act to essentialize places by attributing a single trait as key to defining a whole area. They also exoticize places by focusing on differences as modes of comparisons. But comparisons are often also totalized by turning relative differences into absolute ones; the Occident thus becomes absolutely different from the Orient.

Turning time into space allows geopolitical thinking to categorize the whole world in terms of places' relationships to idealized North European and subsequently American experiences. Time is turned into space as places are designated as backward on a sequence that assumes that other places will become like European ones eventually, through processes of civilization, progress, or, as it was rendered in the second half of the twentieth century, development. But the opposite process is also important. In much discussion of politics in the United States the spatial language has been eclipsed in a discussion of time and progress. The twentieth century was described as the American century; progress, the future and Americanism were rendered as temporal matters, in a world where the geographies of change were occluded in discussions of the promise of the future that might well be placeless as the success of American culture would sweep geographical distinction, rooted in the past that was being transcended, aside. Such themes have been reinvented at the end of the twentieth century once again in the discourses of globalization.

This specification of the world in binary terms runs through other geopolitical themes. The distinction between land power and seapower is read back into the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, just as it is recycled into Cold War distinctions between the continental power of the USSR and the maritime reach of the US. The distinctions between races in nineteenth century European "science" powerfully reinforced the colonizers' claims to civilizational superiority; Europeans had science, the tradition of Greek and Roman law, philosophy, politics, and frequently the Christian religion. Non-European races, living in other zones of the world designated by European scientists and cartographers did not; apparently obvious testament to their inferiority.

But drawing on analogies with the fall of Rome and the earlier dangers posed to Christendom by Mongol horsemen and later by the troops of the Ottoman Empire, danger could still be assumed to reside in these distant places. Linked together with a determinist interpretation of the nature of places, which suggested that the cultural attributes of people were caused by their geographical surroundings, geography could be constructed as the explanation for many historical events. Mackinder's famous paper

of 1904 epitomized this mode of geopolitical reasoning. Fear of the Asian hordes -- in Mackinder's specification of Asian populations, the "yellow peril" -- reappears at the end of the twentieth century in various geopolitical narratives of the dangers of demography and the problems of migration.

The specification of European politics in terms of the territorial state effectively operated to "clean up" the messy political configurations of the world. Following from the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the assumption that states are the territorial containers of societies that occur within their borders became increasingly prevalent. Related to this is the operation of a distinction between foreign and domestic, inside and outside. Sovereign states are the main actors in this scheme; people are only significant in so far as they are designated as citizens of a particular state. But political dangers could cross these boundaries, as geographical metaphors of infections, rotten apples and falling dominos repeatedly suggested in the period of the Cold War.

The territorial states in this system are also usually assumed to be in a condition of perpetual rivalry where one great power is always in danger from the others. Security is a matter of seeking protection from the depredations of others. Military preparations, alliances and complex diplomatic arrangements to "balance" power both perpetuate the dangers of military confrontation and suggest the importance of mechanical metaphors of political power. Primacy is the assumed *desideratum* in such a system; security supposedly comes from hegemony, from being so powerful that no other state can threaten the security based on dominance. But such abstract models of international interaction belie the specific geographic context of particular states, a matter that is of prime concern especially in the military dimensions of rivalry. Proximity and geographical access matter in geopolitical rivalry.

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Biographical Sketch

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