GEOPOLITICS

The study of the geographical factors in world politics and inter-state relations. The term is also used more generally to describe regional strategic relations, as in ‘the geopolitics of the South China Sea’. In the present day it covers much the same ground as International Relations, although with greater emphasis on geographical factors such as location, resources, and accessibility. Within this broad definition, there are many variants and the differences between them are significant. In part, these stem from the chequered history of the term ‘geopolitics’, which fell from favor across much of the Anglo-American world after the 1940s.

Its original or ‘traditional’ form arose towards the end of the 19th century. This ‘imperial geopolitics’ can be thought of as the application of Social Darwinism to the state. Combining ideas of permanent national rivalry, the need for state expansion, environmental determinism, and racist ideas about civilizations, this geopolitics was consciously directed towards informing and aiding statecraft among the European imperial powers, as well as the USA. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1846–1914) for example, warned the US government about the need to restore naval power in order to secure US trade interests. His ideas on sea power were adapted by Halford Mackinder, whose Heartland concept is regarded as the exemplar of this style of reasoning. Inspired by Friedrich Ratzel and the Swedish geographer Rudolph Kjellén (1864–1922)—who coined the term ‘geopolitics’—a school of geopolitik formed in Germany in the 1920s. Because of its close links with the subsequent Nazi regime, American and other geographers repudiated the term ‘geopolitics’, dismissing it as a pseudo-science of racism and crude environmental determinism. Although geographers such as Isaiah Bowman also addressed strategic relations at the world scale they generally described their work as political geography. A recognizable version of geopolitik did, however, thrive among military academies and military dictatorships in South America well into the 1970s. Those scholars who continued to develop and adapt Mackinder’s ideas to the Cold War situation, notably Nicholas Spykman and later Saul Cohen, emphasized spatial themes rather than environmental or racial ones (see geostrategic region). But within academic geography in general, geopolitics had become a dirty word.
The return of geopolitics was more prominent outside departments of geography and took a clear conservative hue. US foreign policy officials and the intellectuals who sought to influence it, recycled and updated many of the ideas of imperial geopolitics from the 1970s onwards (see Clash of Civilizations; Pax Americana). Among geographers, there were two main responses. On the one hand, some argued for a restored geopolitics stripped of its imperial trappings and more attentive to the changing relations between geopolitical and geoeconomic relations in an era of globalization. In particular, this line of research recognized non-state political actors, including social movements and terrorist networks, and new issues such as global environmental change and the global media. A related but distinct response was the formation of critical geopolitics, which drew more on post-structuralist concepts of discourse and representation to interrogate the texts (e.g. speeches, newsreel, policy documents) of politicians and state-centered foreign policy. There are also a number of other strands in current geopolitics. Jennifer Hyndman outlined a ‘feminist geopolitics’, informed by feminist geographical ideas and focused beyond the scale of the state to consider the politics of social justice, harm, sexual violence, and the public/private divide (see fear). ‘Popular geopolitics’ examines how political geographical ideas circulate through film, television, cartoons, and magazines. ‘Anti-geopolitics’ describes the challenges to state-centered geopolitics from within civil society, including dissidents, social movements, and allied forms of resistance. Its aim is to oppose the idea that the interests of the state and its political allies are the same as the interests of communities. Gerry Kearns uses the term ‘progressive geopolitics’ to refer to the ideas and practices in opposition to conservative geopolitics. It has more faith in international law and cosmopolitan ideals as ways of regulating the relations between states and people so as to avoid conflict.

Geopolitics

What is "geopolitics"?

More on Geopolitics

Debate on the term Geopolitics

The term geopolitics reflects the connection between power and interests, strategic decision-making, and geographic space.

The contemporary use of the term deviates radically from its origin in the late 19th century. Originally "geopolitics" reflected an understanding of international affairs strongly influenced by Social Darwinism. It also signaled a cynical realist view of international affairs, with limited belief in the significance of multilateralism, global norms or international law.

As used in this program, "geopolitics" denotes the interplay of natural resources, strategic dominance and geographic space on the one hand, and the various state and non-state actors pursuing individual as well as collective interests on the other.

However, linkage to earlier usage of the term is not entirely broken. The growing use of the term in the public sphere signals a need for a term that reflects the renaissance of great power rivalry and the rise of multi-polarity in the early 21st century.

The Reemergence of Geopolitics

Geopolitics relates political power to geographical space. The word was coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolph Kjellén at the dawn of the 19th century, epitomizing an organic conception of great power rivalry and expansion. While early Anglo-American geopolitical debate concerned the relative importance of land power and sea power, German discourse centered on interstate rivalry in continental space.

The prominent geopolitician Halford Mackinder saw the end of European expansion overseas in the early 20th century. He termed this era the Columbian epoch and heralded a “closed“ geopolitical system as expansion came to an end. Great power rivalry would now intensify, with the Heartland theory as a major perspective on global politics. The Heartland theory said that core of Eurasia was the key to world
dominance. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact some decades later was a political manifestation of the strategic implications of this theory.

In retrospect, Mackinder underestimated the long-term capabilities of offshore sea powers like the United States, as he underestimated how technological advances like submarines and intercontinental missiles could bolster the might of marine based powers. Military technology, certainly, goes into the geopolitical equation, but Mackinder and the heartland theorists had a rather static view of the importance of the steam engine and the railroad which had opened up Eurasia.

The Western strategy of the Cold War was a rim land strategy for containment of the USSR by a string of military alliances around the Eurasian Soviet core – ranging from NATO in the European north-west, CENTO in the Middle-East, SEATO in South-east Asia and ANZUS in the Pacific. Cold War strategies were modeled on classical geopolitical thought. The Columbian epoch was gradually brought to an end with the process of decolonization. A Post-Columbian era slowly emerged, half a century after Mackinder’s pioneering analysis.

The voluntary dissolution of the USSR at Christmas Day 1991 seems like a spectacular negation the the Heartland theory. The political tenant to the Eurasian Core Area ended its ambitions for becoming a global hegemon. The Russian successor state was radically disadvantaged in terms of space and power to proceed with this ambition.

On the other hand, Russia may launch new power projections towards the Arctic, due to oil and gas deposits in more accessible waters as the ice recedes. Eastern Eurasia, accordingly, is emerging as a geopolitical stronghold with the rise of China. The Heartland will remain geopolitically significant, but a unified power is less likely. The center of gravity – in geopolitical terms – is moving towards the North and the East. The geopolitical analysis of the dynamics of the High North should be precise and specific on the implications of these shifting coordinates.

Geopolitical analysis has changed during the 20th century, no longer being tied up with fin-de-siècle social Darwinism, and also with perspectives on power and space at different orders of scale, from the global down to the local level. The Arctic is of medium-sized order with a typically circumpolar character spanning the rim lands of three continents and numerous states. The resources, transport routes and strategic importance of this circumpolar area are the geopolitical foci of analysis. More narrow
sections of this circumpolar area may certainly be blown up without losing the geopolitical point of view.

Globalization and geopolitics are contrasting images of global developments after the end of the Cold War. While globalization indicates interdependence, transnational flows and obliterated state frontiers, geopolitics conjures great power games and power politics. The balance has tilted in favor of geopolitics with the rise of China and India, the reassertion of Russia, and the repercussions of 9/11. This balance does not only change over time. It also works out differently in various parts of the world. Again, the Arctic is a field of tension between contradictory forces.

**In search of conceptual clarity**

by Michael Mayer

In a 1964 US Supreme Court decision, Justice Potter Stewart argued that pornography was difficult to define, but he claimed: “I know it when I see it.” If only geopolitics were so simple. The concept of pornography has remained quite stable; its definition has become a matter of establishing social and legal boundaries. Unfortunately, the fundamental conceptualization of geopolitics has been constantly under revision, making the term so versatile that it nearly inverts Steward’s definition: “I see it, therefore I know it.” Geopolitics is “reemerging” everywhere without a clear and commonly agreed upon idea of what the term implies.

One region that most would agree clearly exhibits geopolitical tensions is Central Asia, though one could find wildly different reasoning behind such a claim. Some might argue, as Rudolph Kjellén would, that Russia and China are expanding into the region and attempting to absorb weaker states like a biological organism. Followers of Halford Mackinder would see continued competition over part of the Heartland. Henry Kissinger defined geopolitics as an approach that focused on finding equilibrium: Russia, China, India and the United States must therefore be acting to balance each other in the region. Thomas P.M Barnett recently drew the ‘Pentagon’s New Map’ of strategic interests, what the US has called “the arc of instability”: Central Asia features prominently. Finally, Colin Gray takes the broadest view by claiming that all politics is in fact geopolitics because politics always occurs within a particular geographical context.
How can one then meaningfully speak of ‘geopolitics’ in a region? Despite historical references to Kjellén, Mackinder and Kissinger, common usage of the term geopolitics seem to be purely descriptive in nature. Østerud defines it as relating political power to geographical space, a concise definition that captures the term’s essence but not its complexity. Much of the conceptual contents of geopolitics remains implicit and therefore in need of ‘unpacking’. More than the relationship between power politics and geography, the term (as commonly used) incorporates a number of underlying assumptions: states are the primary actors in the system, a military-economic competition exists between them for the raw materials needed for national power, that states and alliances are able to ‘balance’ one another either through physical occupation or by securing political influence within a geographical space, and that geography represents perhaps the greatest determinant of political relationships.

Strategy is crucial. The political significance of geography is directly related to, if not defined by, its strategic importance. Some analysts therefore refer instead to ‘geostrategy’. During the Cold War, a strategy of containing the Soviet Union combined with geopolitical assumptions of falling dominoes led American political leaders to regard Southeast Asia as geopolitically decisive – the region’s importance without the marriage of those two concepts would have been minimal. The geopolitical relevance of the Arctic will be determined by states’ perceptions of their strategic interests rather than the innate qualities of the region. Few discuss the geopolitics of the North Sea despite its resources or the English Channel despite the narrow ‘choke point’ through which much shipping must pass. Geographic entities must be strategically contested to have geopolitical relevance.

While the Arctic countries may, as Osterud claims, view the geopolitical center of gravity as shifting north and east, they must be aware that the rest of the world increasingly focuses south and east. The Arctic remains a promise of future resource riches and transport corridors. Russia, economically and demographically weakened, appears just as engaged with European relations, military forays in the Caucasus, and securing gas supplies from Central Asia. Other military-economic powers – the United States, India and China – seem more concerned with emerging markets in South America and Africa, not to mention emerging power relationships and tensions in the Middle East and South Asia. The economic aspects of national power are the principle drivers of these developments, as a subset of each actor’s broader political and strategic interests.
In this regard, the dichotomy between globalization and geopolitics is a false one. The military-economic competition that inspires geopolitical reasoning necessarily incorporates the processes of globalization. This is part of the playing field on which states and non-state actors compete. States are forced to take these trends into consideration, and in many cases use them for strategic gain. In many of today’s bilateral strategic relationships, non-state globalization processes, state corporations and national economic policies interact in complex ways. States both shape the relationships through these processes and are also shaped by them.

This is how Mackinder re-enters the picture. His heartland theory posited that controlling Eurasia was the source of world power because rail networks allowed for the efficient extraction of the region’s raw materials while shielded from adversarial maritime powers (“…would permit the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight”). It was not Eurasia per se, but its strategic resources and the geographic advantages it afforded. Over a century later, the sources of material power have shifted, as have the means of extracting them. The Mackinder of today should look to the current sources of national power: demographics, economic strength, technological advantages, state structures that allow for the efficient wielding of national power (including military power), and so on. As is the case with many historical texts, the reasoning remains relevant but must be reapplied to the features of the current strategic environment. Tomorrow’s Heartland may lie in the Arctic, South Asia, Africa… or even in outer space.