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Why geopolitics?

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Why Geopolitics?

GEOFFREY SLOAN and COLIN S. GRAY

The popularity of geopolitical theory from 1945 to the present has been rather like the length of hemline on a woman's skirt; it has fallen and risen with the vagaries of fashion. The current vogue can be traced to 1979 when Henry Kissinger published the first volume of his memoirs titled *The White House Years*. It was significant that this book made continual use of the term 'geopolitics'. This was important for two reasons: first, Kissinger used it as a method of analysis to combat the American liberal policies of idealism; second, it was utilised as a means of presenting an alternative to the conservative policies of an ideological anti-Communism. Kissinger claimed for geopolitics a synonymity with global equilibrium and permanent national interests in the world balance of power. He defined geopolitics as follows: 'by geopolitical I mean an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium'.¹ The revival of the word 'geopolitics' by Kissinger resulted in two discernible paths of development. 'It led, by example and reaction, to further reflection on global strategy in the geopolitical tradition. Secondly, and perhaps in the end more significantly, it popularized the word geopolitics, which entered the language in a way which it never had before, though at the substantial price of ambiguity and confusion of meanings.'²

This special issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* has two related aims. First to make a contribution to dispelling the ambiguity and confusion that still surrounds the term geopolitics. Second, to illuminate the relationships between geopolitics, geography and strategy, and to show how the practice and study of strategy requires a continuing exchange between history and theory. In essence, geopolitics is an attempt to draw attention to the importance of certain geographical patterns in political history. It is a

theory of spatial relationships and historical causation. From it explanations have been deduced which suggest the contemporary and future political relevance of various geographical concepts. Furthermore, it can be argued that geopolitics combines historical knowledge with a sophisticated capacity for theorising. The result has been a powerful analytical framework.

One of the aims of geopolitics is to emphasise that political predominance is a question not just of having power in the sense of human or material resources, but also of the geographical context within which that power is exercised: 'in nearly all international transactions involving some element of opposition, resistance, struggle or conflict, the factors of location, space and distance between the interacting parties have been significant variables. This significance is embodied in the maxim, "power is local". This is to say, political demands are projected through space from one location to another upon the earth's surface.'³

This is not to say that the geographical environment determines the objectives or strategies of the foreign or internal policies of a particular state. States do not find themselves in a geographical strait-jacket; instead, geography or geographical configurations present opportunities for policy-makers and politicians. This was recognised by one of the founders of modern geopolitical theory, Sir Halford Mackinder (1861–1947). Writing in 1890 he claimed that:

the course of politics is the product of two sets of forces, impelling and guiding. The impetus is from the past, in the history embedded in a people's character and tradition. The present guides the movement by economic wants and geographical opportunities. Statesmen and diplomatists succeed and fail pretty much as they recognise the irresistible power of these forces.⁴

The extent to which geographical opportunities will be exploited depends on strategy. That is a concern with the deployment and use of armed forces to attain particular political objectives.

Political objectives are a consequence of choices made by policy-makers. It is from these choices that political and strategic importance is attached to geographical configurations and locations. It also reflects the nature of politics as a decision-making process. In this process the geographical factors which influence politics are a product of policy-makers selecting particular objectives and attempting to realise them by the conscious formulation of strategies. This relationship between the geographical environment and the decision-making process is a dynamic

one; it is dependent upon changing levels of transport and weapons technology. This dynamic aspect is one of the most important links between geopolitical theory, geography and strategy. It illustrates the pivotal nature of the continuing exchange between theory and history.

Furthermore, geography can be described as the mother of strategy, in that the geographical configuration of land and sea, with respect to a state's strategic policy, or an alliance between states, can exercise a twofold strategic conditioning influence: on locations important for defence, and on the routes and geographical configurations which favour an attacking force, be it on land or sea. Geography, it is worth adding, is pertinent at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of conflict, although its use or misuse by commanders at different levels can have very different consequences.

This special issue is divided into two parts. The first, comprising seven essays is designed to illustrate the way that geopolitical theory derives from interpretation of geographical configuration and historical experience. These studies address questions of methodology and approach: what reasonably might we expect geopolitical theory to achieve for illumination of the relationship between geography and strategy? The second part consists of a further five essays which offer a new focus on the relationship between geography and strategy, a relationship often ignored in the past.

Geoffrey Sloan explains the 1904, 1919, and 1943 versions of Mackinder's heartland theory in the context of the unique historical periods of their formulation. He then looks at the propositions which can be deduced to suggest future relevance for the heartland theory. Mackinder's view of geography is interpreted as a combination of a geographical *longue durée* and a theatre of military action. A good geopolitical analysis, Sloan suggests, must present a picture of the constellation of forces which exist at a particular time and within a particular geographical frame of reference. This approach makes Mackinder's geopolitical theories prominent among the most important of the twentieth century.

Jon Sumida breaks new ground with respect to the geopolitical theories of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914). Mahan's work in the past has been judged negatively to have been cast unduly in a deterministic mould. Achievement of naval supremacy appeared directly linked to several immutable geographical conditions. Sumida explains why Mahan came to be associated with an absolutist approach to history. This was because of a set of physical and human geographical propositions whose use in connection with the explanation of major international political outcomes made it easy for many people to believe that Mahan argued that geography determined the course of history. Sumida's careful consideration of Mahan's

work reveals that such a characterisation is faulty and seriously misleading. What emerges is a view of Mahan that has not been seen before. It is one where human affairs are complicated and outcomes dependent upon complex interactions and contingent forces. Mahan's view of the utility of history illuminating geography and strategy considers a range of possibilities, including contradictory or even mutually exclusive ones.

Ben Lambeth considers air power from two innovative perspectives. The first is what air power has become, particularly in the context and wake of Operation 'Desert Storm' in 1991. The thesis is that it has now become transformative in its effects and can produce strategic results in joint warfare; space surveillance and communications are a large part of what has given airpower the value-added clout it offers to joint force commanders today. The second perspective is in many ways the antithesis of the first. As early as 1919 Mackinder claimed that air power had an advantage over land mobility, but it had a boomerang nature since it proceeds from and to a land base after flight, and those land bases can be captured by land power. Lambeth also maintains that carrier-borne aircraft cannot conduct a sustained air campaign. Therefore the great challenge for the future will be whether countries such as the United States can build partnerships and otherwise plan ahead for access in many parts of the world. This, Lambeth argues, will be critical if air power is to meet its promise in future conflicts.

Everett Dollman's is perhaps the most ambitious of the essays on geopolitical theory. For the first time an attempt has been made to discern the geopolitical dimensions of space. This has led to the coining of the adjective 'astropolitical'. Dollman uses Mackinder's heartland theory as his geopolitical template. He argues that the vast resources of solar space represent the heartland of the astropolitical model. Earth space, like Eastern Europe in Mackinder's design, is the most critical arena for astropolitics. Control of earth space not only guarantees long-term control of the outer reaches of space, it provides a near-term advantage on the terrestrial battlefield. From early warning and detection of missile and force movements, to target planning and battle damage assessment, space-based intelligence gathering assets, Dollman argues, already have proved themselves as legitimate force multipliers.

There is also a pertinent Mahanian geopolitical analogy. Mahan argued that control of certain bodies of water were particularly important for economic and military reasons. Space, Dollman argues, like the sea, can be traversed potentially in any direction, but because of gravity wells and the forbidding cost of lifting weight into orbit, over time space-faring nations

will develop specific pathways for the heaviest traffic. Indeed, space highways and 'chokepoints' are clearly discernible already.

For much of the post-1945 period geopolitics has been something of an intellectual pariah. It is worth noting that between the 1940s and the publication of Colin Gray's *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era* in 1977 (with the exception of Sen's *Basic Principles of Geopolitics and History*, published in India in 1975) no book title in English used the term geopolitics. The effect of this condition of neglect was compounded by the advent of critical theory and postmodernism which emerged in International Relations in the 1980s.

The emergence of these approaches was a reaction to two things: first to the perceived dominance of neorealist and neoliberal perspectives; second to the disintegration of the Marxist 'dependency' critique of orthodox thinking on the subject. This approach has generated different 'critical studies' that have been applied to subject areas in International Relations. Geopolitics has not been excepted from this trend. However, it is important to understand just what this approach is attempting: 'what justified the label "critical", is a concern with human emancipation – the goal in each case is to re-orient their sub-discipline towards this goal, and to refuse to accept accounts of the subject area that do not privilege emancipation'.⁵

Gearóid Ó Tuathail, on critical geopolitics, argues that geopolitics has a self image as an instrumental form of knowledge and rationality. It takes the existing power structure for granted and works within it to provide advice to foreign policy makers. Ó Tuathail claims that its dominant modes of narration are declarative (this is how the world is) and imperative (this is what we must do). Critical geopolitics, it can be argued, is different in two important respects: first it is a problematising theoretical project that places the existing structure of power and knowledge in question; second it critiques the superficial and self-interested ways in which orthodox geopolitics reads the world political map by projecting its own cultural and political assumptions upon it while concealing these same assumptions.

In addition to these two perspectives Ó Tuathail suggests that geopolitics is mythic because it promises uncanny clarity and insight in a complex world. This claim of clarity is sustained by the use of such binaries from the geopolitical tradition as heartland/rimland, land power/sea power, and East/West. In short, critical geopolitics aims to persuade strategic thinkers to acknowledge the power of ethnocentric cultural constraints in their perception of places and the dramas occurring within them.

The last look at geopolitical theory is also an attempt to break new ground. David Lonsdale assesses the implications of information

technology. Specifically, he argues that the defining characteristic which identifies the 'infosphere' as a dimension of strategy is the manner in which strategic power can be projected through and within this unique environment. He draws an important analogy with both sea power and air power. In both these environments the dominant operational concept is to gain command of a particular geographical dimension of strategy. Yet Lonsdale argues persuasively that use of the infosphere has its own challenges. The key being to ensure your own use, yet deny your adversary the same facility. He reminds us of the requirement for some functioning enemy information infrastructure if deception operations are to be effected. The primary characteristics of information power are flexibility and accessibility.

What has this to do with geopolitics? Lonsdale argues convincingly that information power is unlikely to become transformative in its effects and produce strategic results independently. Instead it will develop its own geopolitical logic and will supplement and enable success in the other existing environments of strategy. In short, in its own unique way it will become territorialised.

The aim of the second part of this Special Issue is to explore the relationship between geography and strategy and to draw geopolitical conclusions from it. Colin Gray sets out in a comprehensive manner the relationship between geography and strategy. He argues that geography cannot be an optional extra for consideration by the strategic theorist or planner, because it drives the character and potential contemporary reach of tactical, hence operational, prowess.

What is innovative about Gray's approach is that he first fixes the nature of strategy as the dialogue between policy and military power. He argues that in reconciling political objectives with military ones, the strategist must deal with a realm of great complexity and uncertainty. Policy, in a sense, must be more important than strategy, just as strategy must be superior to operations and tactics. Strategy would be literally senseless in the absence of policy. Having located strategy in the hierarchy between policy and military power, the geographical dimension of strategy is then elucidated. He argues that strategy is inherently geographical and that even when other dimensions are examined they are each subject to the influence of what can be termed fairly as geographical influence. In no sense is this a claim for geography as the 'master dimension' of strategy. Gray's argument simply is that geography always matters for strategic experience, and on occasion it will matter hugely.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this approach is the way in which

geography and strategy are related to geopolitical theory. Gray argues that the principal glory of the 'grand narrative' of geopolitical theory is the ability to tie apparently disparate phenomena together in meaningful ways. He suggests that it is exactly the meaningful character of geopolitical theories that renders them so controversial.

Another important focus is what Clausewitz called the relationship between a logic of policy and a grammar of war. Gray underlines the point that the grammar of strategy literally and inalienably is dictated by the distinctive requirements of physical geography. Furthermore, he argues that to plan and act globally, rather than regionally or locally, is not to transcend geography, let alone geopolitics, in fact quite the reverse. A global perspective is simply to plan and behave for a more extensive domain. Strategy and politics must be 'done' within geography. Gray's thesis is that geography is inescapable.

Nicholas Rodger sheds new light on the subtle relationship between geography and strategic policy, a combination of conditioning influence and the changing meaning of geographical conditions. What he illustrates in an engaging manner is the profound influence that geographical configuration and weather had on naval operations prior to the advent of steam propulsion. Just moving your naval force from its base to where you wished it to fight was an exercise often fraught with danger. There were few safe landfalls and prevailing winds often prevented a naval commander from taking what appeared to be the most direct route. For example, in the eighteenth century the quickest passage normally available from Jamaica to Barbados (a distance of just over 1,000 miles by steamer) was via London or New York! Changes in transport and weapon technology were to have a profound impact on the relationship between geography and naval power. Technology was, and remains, a key dynamic factor in the relationship between the geographical environment and the decision-making process.

This point is also well exploited by Ewan Anderson on boundaries. The idea of a boundary is very much a product of nineteenth century developments in cartography, which is to say in changes in the technology of map making. The geopolitical implications of this have been profound, especially with respect to the political claims that states would make in the twentieth century. Anderson succinctly sums up the difference between frontiers and boundaries. Frontiers have a spatial extent whereas boundaries have no horizontal dimension. The crucial dimension of boundaries occurs in the vertical plane, enabling states to claim air space and subterranean space (though generally not overhead, extra-terrestrial space).

Significantly, he also identifies a crucial geopolitical challenge for the

future. This is the issue of trans-boundary movements. It is an area where international law is still in an early stage of development. Perhaps the most important geographical issue concerning trans-boundary movements in the early twenty-first century will be the transportation route of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea basin. Since all the producer states are landlocked, transportation will require both pipeline and tanker. Thus the concept of boundaries will face a new challenge which will bind certain countries in this area closer together than they are at present.

Williamson Murray's focus is the relationship between geography and war from a historical perspective. Important changes occur when geography is interpreted as a theatre of military action. First, it becomes more abstract, certainly simplified and schematised. The military strategist or commander will perceive only those geographical features relevant to the military objectives he is attempting to achieve. This perspective of geography as a theatre of military action has a lineage traceable to antiquity.

This aspect of the military art is examined from the tactical, operational and strategic levels. At the tactical level, geography becomes terrain, a crucial component in war. Murray shows that for war in the twentieth century an ability to use terrain remained crucial. He cites the example of the lack of British tactical proficiency in World War II when they were consistently surprised to find that the Germans had sited their positions on reverse slope positions throughout the Normandy campaign. Also he argues convincingly that air power, despite claims to the contrary, is a prisoner of terrain in that air bases are the tactical framework within which an air force wages campaigns.

At the operational level, it is in the realm of logistics and intelligence that an appreciation of geography and distance is most vital. The finest understanding of the role of geography at the operational level, it is suggested, is given by the US Navy in its drive through the Central Pacific in 1943 and 1944. This superior operational performance was a product of 20 years of wargames and study at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

Murray shows convincingly that it is at the strategic level that geography has exercised its greatest influence. The reason for this is rarely noticed. Mistakes at the tactical and operational level often can be corrected promptly. At the strategic level, however, mistakes tend to live forever – or at least until the war changes in two respects: first, the coalition of the participants; second, by radical change in war aims. An example of this is the fall of France in June 1940, and the inability of the Royal Navy to use naval bases in the south of Ireland. This created a crisis with grave potential strategic consequences which was only averted by America's entry into the war in December 1941.

One aspect of the relationship between geography and strategy still clouded in extraordinary controversy, is the impact of the German school of geopolitics on the statecraft and strategy of Nazi Germany. The founder of the German school, Major General Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), left a confusing legacy for future scholars to unravel. At the heart of the German school was the assertion of a dynamic relationship between the concept of a natural boundary and the idea of continuous geographical expansion. Geopolitics, wrote Haushofer ‘shall and must become the geographic conscience of the state’.⁶ As early as 1913 he advocated ‘a transcontinental route free of Anglo-Saxons’, which would link Germany with Russia and Japan.

After the Second World War both Karl Haushofer – until his suicide in 1946 – and his surviving son, Heinz, claimed that after 1938 Haushofer had worked for the Nazis only under duress. Yet Holger Herwig manages with the use of new primary sources to reveal another reality in which Haushofer used German geopolitics as a tool of political propaganda. For example, one month after the launch of Operation ‘Barbarossa’ in June 1941 Haushofer maintained that this operation constituted the greatest task of geopolitics, the rejuvenation of space in the ‘Old World’. Furthermore, it constituted a bold attempt: ‘positively and creatively to turn the task of forging Eurasia and Eurafica into reality’.

These statements contributed greatly to the tendency, since 1945, for writers to perceive all geopolitical theory as synonymous with German geopolitics. However, two features made German geopolitics unique: first the subordination of all facts of political knowledge to the primacy of geography; second, the assertion that the German Reich was a superior polity whose destiny was quite separate from that of any other European state. As a result of these characteristics the shadows were cast long. Geopolitical theory became an intellectual pariah for the best part of 35 years.

In the final contribution to this Special Issue, John Erickson gives a compelling account of the phoenix-like rise of geopolitics in a country that formerly was in the forefront of demonising it. The former Soviet Union currently manifests an obsessive preoccupation with geopolitics. Erickson maintains that with the collapse of Communism Russia suffered a huge crisis of identity and a challenge to its security requirements of truly historic dimensions. The withdrawal from the centre of Europe, from Prague to Smolensk, has reduced Russia in Europe to the geostrategic condition that obtained three centuries ago. To deal with this revolutionary situation there has been a recourse to geopolitical thinking. In particular, Erickson shows

how there has been a restitution of the geopolitical approach coupled with the introduction of the term national security. For the Russians national security embraces the idea of the state as a tool assuring 'the best possible conditions' for the individual, for society, and for the state itself, as conditioned by the entire spectrum of active geopolitical factors.

In post-Soviet Russia geopolitics also has been subject to an astonishing process of institutionalisation. The Section of Geopolitics and Security of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences was established for all practical purposes by the Russian General Staff on 22 November 1991, its membership composed of senior Russian officers associated with the General Staff. This new institutional prominence is fused, as Erickson points out, with a radical revision in appreciation of Russian strategic capabilities, replacing previous parity with the United States by an emphasis on strategic stability. Yet it is also pointed out that the most important factors in Russia's 'geopolitical security' are internal conditions rather than external parameters.

In conclusion this special issue is one of the very few attempts to bring together recent theoretical advances in geopolitical writing with strategic analysis from a historical perspective. The resulting synthesis furthers the debate about geopolitical theory and, more broadly, about the role of geography in explaining the development of strategic thinking in the past and its possible evolution in the future.

Three points emerge most prominently about the nature of geopolitical theory: first, is its dynamic nature, a dynamism heavily attributable to the changes in transport and weapons technology; second, is identification of the main roles that geopolitical theory can play. First, it can fulfil an interpretative role. It suggests a view of international politics and strategic history which is shaped by the geographical configuration of land and sea and the political development of particular states. Second, geopolitics can function as a policy science. For goals to be secured certain geopolitical perspectives have to be taken into consideration. Geopolitics can help explain the structure of security problems. Third, geopolitics can be an instrument of political warfare.

Furthermore, geopolitical ideas can be a convenient vehicle for justification of political decisions taken on other grounds. The intended effect is to give coherence to certain political aims. In the case of strategic policy, political objectives are achieved through attention to the geographical configuration of land and sea.

Finally, these different roles raise the question of the future utility of geopolitical theory for those who will make strategy and policy. Sir Halford

Mackinder, writing in 1942, provided a synthesis of the qualities that policy makers will still find relevant in the twenty-first century:

They must have a global outlook and a quick readiness to meet emergencies, for it was never more true than in this newly 'closed' world that 'our stability is but balance, and wisdom lies in the masterful administration of the unforeseen'; they must also have a trained power of judging values and be capable of long views in framing policies for the future; and they will, of course, still need an understanding of the momentum with which both Man and his environment come to the present from the past.⁷

Above all else, Mackinder underlined the point that geopolitics, geography, and strategy serve together.

NOTES

1. H. Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown 1979) p.914.
2. L.W. Hepple, 'The Revival of Geopolitics', *Political Geography Quarterly* 5/4 (Oct. 1986) p.522.
3. H. and M. Sprout, 'Geography and International Relations in an Era of Revolutionary Change', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6/1 (March 1960) p.145.
4. H.J. Mackinder, 'The Physical Basis of Political Geography', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 6 (1890) p.84.
5. C. Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press 1997) p.53.
6. K. Haushofer, 'Pfligt und Anspruch der Geopolitik als Wissenschaft', *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* 12 (1935) p.443.
7. H.J. Mackinder, 'Geography, an Art and a Philosophy', *Geography* 27 (1942) pp.129–30.