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Les théories de la Géopolitique

Les contributions anciennes et nouvelles à une approche théorique en géopolitique

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## Main Theoretical Currents in Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century

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### **Résumés**

Il est difficile de dégager des approches théoriques dans les courants de la pensée géopolitique traditionnelle, tant il est vrai qu'il s'agit avant tout de « visions du monde » contextualisées par l'Histoire. Néanmoins, on peut déceler dans les écrits de tous les horizons des *constantes territoriales* qui, rétroactivement, conditionnent la vie internationale.

Depuis les années 1960, différents travaux à vocation théorique ou méthodologique ont été proposés, notamment en matière de géostratégie parce qu'il existait dans ce domaine une « demande ». On veut penser que leur synthèse permettra des avancées.

It is difficult to identify theoretical approaches in the currents of traditional geopolitical thinking, as it is true that it's all about "worldviews" contextualized by history. Nevertheless, one can detect in the writings of all walks of constant territorial retroactively condition of international life.

Since the 1960s, various work-oriented theoretical or methodological have been proposed, particularly in terms of geo-strategy because it existed in that area a "request". We want to believe that their synthesis will advance.

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### **Entrées d'index**

**Mots-clés** : géographie politique, géopolitique, géostratégie, modèle, vision

**Keywords** : political geography, geopolitics, geostrategy, model, vision

## Avertissement

- 1 Parce qu'il est inconcevable de passer ici en revue, étant donné l'objet précis du numéro, tout ce qui a pu s'écrire au titre de la géopolitique, les recensions effectuées dans cet article par Pascal Venier et dans l'article qui suit par David Crikemans ont pour but de présenter les éléments épars susceptibles de contribuer à une approche plus formelle que celle qui a habituellement cours. Il ne s'agit donc pas de faire, avec ces deux articles, un panorama exhaustif des auteurs ou des courants de la géopolitique, mais d'en extraire un certain nombre de points de vue dans ce qu'ils ont de plus théorisant. Tout en rappelant, très brièvement, l'histoire de cette pensée.

## Introduction

- 2 As defining Geopolitics is a notoriously difficult task, it is proposed to use as a starting point two working definitions. The first definition offered by political geographers Van der Wusten and Dijkink (2002, p. 20) is threefold, as the term Geopolitics can be used for (1) 'a type of analysis using data concerning the international position of a country in light of its geographical features'; (2) 'a set of rules applicable in conducting statecraft based on such analyses'; and (3) 'a discourse, a sustained argument, that describes and evaluates a country's position in the world, possibly based on such analyses and the application of such rules.' Both a political scientist and a practitioner of statecraft, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1986, p. xiv) makes an interesting distinction between the geopolitical, the strategic and the geostrategic: 'geopolitical reflects the combination of geographic and political factors determining the condition of a state or region, and emphasizing the influence of geography on politics, strategic refers to the comprehensive and planned application of measures to achieve a central goal or to vital assets of military significance; and geostrategic merges consideration with geopolitical ones.' These definitions bring some clarity, but are far from fully accounting for the diversity of meaning given to Geopolitics.

## Yesterday

- 3 The spatial analysis of political phenomena is the object of study for both Political Geography and Geopolitics. The Nineteenth Century was a formative period for modern Social Sciences and it is, in its later part that Political Geography progressively emerged as a branch of the academic discipline of Geography. The publication by German Geographer Friedrich Ratzel of his great classic *Politische Geographie* (1897), in this respect, is universally recognized as the first systematic treatment of the subject. However, Political Geography remained somewhat of a minor genre within Geography as a whole, and within Human Geography specifically. The word Geopolitik was originally

coined, in Swedish, by political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in 1899, in an article on the geography of his country. Using this new term was a way to set apart what he considered as a completely legitimate branch of Political Science from both Geography and Anthropology (Holdar, 1992 ; Tunander, 2001). Kjellén's intention was to 'construct an objective way to analyze the evolution of the power of states and to examine how this process affected interstate relations (Holdar, 1992, p. 307).' Kjellén was giving to Geo-Politik a very restrictive meaning and, using an organic analogy, saw it as 'the study of the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space; that is as land, territory, area, or, most pregnantly, as country' (Kjellén, 1917, p. 46). An analytical framework envisaged the study of a state's location in relation to other states (Topopolitik), the form of its territory (Morphopolitik), as well as its size/area (Physiopolitik) (Holdar, 1992, p. 312). It must be stressed that Geopolitik was merely one of the five dimensions in the study of the state, together with Demopolitik, Oekopolitik, Sociopolitik and Kratopolitik. In turn, the study of the state was part of a much broader and much more ambitious intellectual project, developing a comprehensive systematic approach to Political Science, the ultimate objective of which was to provide a Linnaean system (Holdar, 1992, p. 309). The impact of the neologism Geo-Politik was initially very limited outside Sweden until the Great War. The term Geopolitik first appeared in Germany, when one of Kjellén's articles was translated in that language in 1905. During the Great War, Kjellén's book, *Staten sore liksform* (1916), almost immediately translated into German as *Der Staat als Lebensform* (1917), decisively contributed to popularize the term Geopolitik, which soon entered the German popular language (Holdar, 1992, p. 318). Geopolitics has long suffered, and is still suffering to a degree, from being associated with both the German school of Geopolitik, itself associated with Nazi barbarianism.

4 In the wake of Germany's defeat in the First World War, Major General Karl Haushofer developed his very own doctrine of Geopolitik. The aim was to discredit the Versailles treaty, which had humiliatingly imposed upon Germany a traumatizing territorial amputation. Kjellén's concept of Geopolitik was accordingly 'adopted, adapted and eventually distorted for political purposes' (Mead, 1972, p. 9). Haushofer always remained vague about the definition and theoretical basis of Geopolitik (Heske, 1987, p. 140). It is however clear that a geoderministic perspective did underlay his geopolitical thinking, as Murphy (1997) has shown. Abdicating the scientific anchoring of geography, for a pseudo-scientific approach, clearly did unequivocally set Geopolitik against Ratzelian *Politische Geographie*. Such spatial concepts as *Lebensraum*, *Grossraum* and *Mitteleuropa* were deployed uncritically, and combined with 'magic cartography', as means to propaganda in order to promote an expansionist agenda (Herb, 1989). Haushofer, without ever formally joining the national-socialist party, was nevertheless closely associated with some of its leaders and after 1933, became an apologist of the new regime and was rewarded with honors. (Korinman, 1990, p. 265 ; p. 261-262) It is a fact that Geopolitik was incorporated into National Socialist policy after 1933, but this does nevertheless not mean for so much that Geopolitik directly informed German foreign policy (Crone, 1948).

5 Little know is the fact that the adjective geo-political and the noun Geo-politics respectively appeared in the English language as early as 1902 and 1904. This was under the pen of Emil Reich, a Hungarian polymath who

had settled in Britain (Reich, 1904, p. 8-9). From his, Geo-Politics was 'the combined influence of geographical with political facts is one of the most decisive elements in human institutions (Reich, 1908b, p. v).' However, both the work of Reich, who died in 1910, and the term Geo-Politics were soon forgotten. Short (1935) seems to be the only one using the term Geo-Politics, but this was in a book of vulgarization of limited interest. It was only during the Second World War that the term started to be commonly used in English. As Germany was gaining control of Continental Europe, the phenomenon of Geopolitik raised up much interest in the press in the United States, as it was deemed to be the secret behind the German success. At the same time the geopolitical reasoning of British Geographer and Liberal Unionist Politician Sir Halford Mackinder, one of the leading figures of the British New Geography at the turn of the century, was rediscovered. He, who never used the term Geopolitics to describe his thinking, had simply intended to use his discipline Geography as 'an aid to statecraft'.

6 In 'The Geographical Pivot of History'(1904), he had pertinently observed a closure of the World, and sought 'a formula [...] express[ing] certain aspects . . . of geographical causation in universal history' (Mackinder, 1904, p. 421). Accordingly, he had ventured into conducting an analysis at a truly global scale, based on the historical opposition between continental powers and maritime powers. This had involved developing a provocative and far-ranging hypothesis in contending that the vast zone of continental and arctic drainage of Central Asia, the pivot-zone or heart-land, had long been the geographical pivot of history and remained the 'pivot of the world's politics'. Finally, offering a rendering of the world divided in three strategic realms, pivot-zone or heartland, inner-crescent and outer-crescent, he warned that control of the heartland could become the basis for a global domination, by one or a combination of continental powers. He felt absolutely necessary for the maritime powers to adapt to the threat posed by continental powers. In Mackinder (1919), what was initially only a 'working hypothesis', became the heartland thesis, without his providing a rigorous demonstration of its theoretical validity. He warned that the triumph of the great democratic ideal may be short lived, unless 'the geographical realities which have a lasting influence on world politics' were fully taken into account; a power which would control both Eastern Europe and the Heartland would be able to dominate the World Island (Europe, Africa, and Asia), and in turn the whole world. Accordingly, he recommended the creation of a 'middle tier' of seven, permanent, independent states between Russia and Germany.

7 An American school of Geopolitics also suddenly appeared during World War II. For instance, Yale political scientist Nicholas Spykman, offered an analysis of the position of the US 'in terms of geography and power politics', in order to allow for the formulation of 'a grand strategy for both war and peace based on the implications of its geographic location in the world (Spykman, 1942, p. 8).' Spykman played at the time an influential role in reorienting American foreign policy from isolationism to 'interventionist globalism'. Using Mackinder as a basis for the development of his geopolitical theory, he argued that it was what Mackinder termed 'Inner or Marginal Crescent', in other words the periphery rather than the heartland which really was critical, which he named the Rimland (Meinig, 1956, p. 554). During the World War, Mackinder himself was invited to draft an update of his geopolitical theory, which he did in 'The Round World and the Winning of the Peace', published in Foreign Affairs (Mackinder, 1943).

8 In the period immediately following the war, the Haushoferian experience left a lasting mark. As Parker (1993, p. 1072) notes ‘for a whole generation afterwards the now discredited Geopolitik tended to cast doubt on the integrity of political geography as a whole.’ Accordingly, after 1945, Political Geography, took a characteristically apolitical orientation, but also, besides electoral geography, had very little interaction with Political Science. British Geographer Leslie Hepple (1986, p. S23), analyzing this decline of geopolitics in Europe and the United States after the war, noted how ‘the overall picture of the 1950s and 1960s is one of geopolitics being avoided and relegated to the historical sections of texts in both political geography and political science, and the word itself having little currency in academic or policy debates.’ Outside the academy, Geopolitics did not disappear completely, and survived in very specific niches, in particular the military, in the United States and beyond (Sloan, 1988). Geopolitical theory seems to have been extremely influential in the 1950s and 1960s and to have informed the strategy of Containment, practiced by the US government, and its correlate, the domino theory (Sloan, 1988).

9 In 1963, in a courageous attempt to speak truth to power, American geographer Saul Cohen offered a robust refutation of the ‘Heartland-Rimland thesis’, arguing that : ‘the Free World has become the victim of a myth – the myth of the inherent unity of World Island, given the unity of Heartland in combination with part of the Rimland. An adjunct of the myth is that the sea based powers cannot maintain their position unless complete command over all parts of the Eurasian littoral is maintained. This is the myth that stems from Mackinder’s earlier writings and Spykman’s rejoinders (Cohen, 1963, p. 59).’

10 Wisely taking the precaution to stress that he did not ‘question the thesis that control of the World Island by one power would ultimately spell world control’, Cohen concluded that, ‘those who have accepted the Heartland-Rimland thesis have also accepted the ‘falling domino’ game as applied to the Rimland. They have driven themselves into a frenzy of effort to plug all possible leaks in the Rimland dike, regardless of the risks involved in making commitments or the chances of success (Cohen, 1963, p. 59).’ This however did not mean condemning Geopolitics, as Cohen in his landmark treatise, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World* (1963), explicitly developed a framework for geopolitical analysis, the purpose of which was both the ‘description of geographical settings as they relate to political power’ and ‘laying out the spatial frameworks that embrace interacting political power units (Cohen, 1963, p. 25).’ Cohen undoubtedly played the role of a precursor in the renewal of Geopolitics which took place from the 1970s onwards. But, the publication of *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution* (1977), by Colin Gray signaled the revival of geopolitical theory.

## Today

11 One of the main proponent of contemporary geopolitical theory is Colin Gray, who strongly influenced by the work of both Mackinder and Spykman professes adherence to the orthodoxy of Classical Geopolitics (Gray, 1977, 1988, p. 2005). Defining Geopolitics as ‘the spatial study and practice of international

relations', which 'explains the dynamic spatial dimension to some persisting patterns of conflict in international relations', he considers that 'Geopolitics is a variant of classical realism' (Gray, 2005, p. 18, 28 and 29). Gray (1988, p.15) summarized his views by writing that for him, 'control of the World-Island of Eurasia-Africa by a single power would, over the long term, mean control of the world. [...] land power and sea power meet/ clash in the Eurasian-African Rimlands and marginal seas. Control of those Rimlands and marginal seas by an insular power is not synonymous with control of the World Island, but it does mean the denial of eventual global hegemony to the Heartland power (that is, the Soviet Union) (Gray, 1988, p.15).'

12 Another case in point, is the work of former US National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who also invoking the legacy of Mackinder, has produced a series of geostrategic studies. Starting with *Game plan, A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest* (1986), he has regularly updated his analysis, based on the theory of the heartland, to take into account the new realities of the post-cold war period. Wrote Brzezinski (1997, p. xiii–xiv), 'ever since the continents started interacting politically, some five hundred years ago, Eurasia has been the center of world power [...] American foreign policy [...] must employ its influence in Eurasia in a manner that creates a stable continental equilibrium, with the United States as the political arbiter [...] it is imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges, capable of dominating Eurasia and thus also of challenging America.' His latter work, concerned with the politics of hegemony, has been the object of some criticism for developing a form of analysis intended to advance a specific political agenda.

13 Geopolitical theory is however not only limited to the conservative policy analysis. A case in point in this respect is the neo-Weberian geopolitical theory developed by American sociologist Randall Collins, which allowed him to predict as early as 1980, 'the future decline of the Russian Empire' (Collins, 1986, 1995, 1999). Collins has explained how 'extending conflict theory, [he] decided to take seriously Max Weber's definition of the state as the monopolization of legitimate force upon a territory. Turning this definition into an explanatory theory meant treating everything in it as a variable; the result was a theory of the conditions that determine geopolitical rises and falls in territorial power, together with the consequences that flow from these changes in power (Collins, 1995, p. 1552).' The latest version of his geopolitical theory, which highlighted the major principles of causal processes, includes five principles: 1) size and resource advantage favors territorial expansion; 2) geopolitical or 'marchland' advantage favors territorial expansion; 3) overextension and disintegration; 4) interaction of geopolitical disadvantages; and 5) interconnected by a cumulative dynamic. Using his theory, Collins made noteworthy predictions about the coming collapse of the USSR, which appear with hindsight unusually impressive (Collins, 1995). However, he candidly admits that : 'current [Geopolitical] theory is not very precise. [...] from the evidence available in 1980, I predicted that the USSR would disintegrate within thirty to fifty years. Frankly, I was surprised that it happened so soon, but it certainly was within the scope of my prediction' (Collins, 1999, p. 64).

14 A first form of geopolitical analysis is based on a global approach, which is best explained by the work of Saul Cohen (1963, 1973, and 2003) and Gerard Dussouy (2001, 2006, 2007, and 2009), however the systems approach of Alastair Taylor (1999) also deserves a mention. Cohen's thinking on global

geopolitics is informed by General Systems Theory, 'combining organismic concepts from Herbert Spencer, the sociologist, with those of Heinz Werner, the psychologist, and Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the psychobiologist' (Cohen, 2003, p. 58). His aim was 'to identify the nature of the world's complex geopolitical structure and the roles and capacities of its various components. It is the hope of this author that a better understanding of the geopolitical forces that shape the international system can lead to shared national strategies that promote the maintenance of global equilibrium' (Cohen, 2003, p. 9) Cohen considered that geopolitical analysis had two major purposes, the 'description of geographical settings as they relate to political power', and the 'laying out the spatial frameworks that embrace interacting political power units (Cohen, 1963, p. 25).' His analytical framework was based on three key concepts: geostrategic regions, which have global extent, their subdivisions, geopolitical regions, directly derived from geographic regions, which only have regional extent, and shatterbelts, 'a large, strategically located region[s] [...] occupied by a number of conflicting states and is caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers (Cohen, 1963, p. 83).' The initial concept of geostrategic regions was transformed into that of geopolitical realms, new concepts were developed, such as gateway regions, definition and the gateway states, 'small exchange states with qualified sovereignty that will spin off from existing national entities to help link the world system (Cohen, 1991, p. 551).'

15 Gérard Dussouy (2001, 2006, 2007, 2009) has more recently presented a fascinating model, based on the analysis of the geopolitical systemic configuration, in which complexity is approached by looking in succession at five spaces. Three central levels, the demographic space, the diplomatico-strategic space, and the economic space, form the geopolitical infrastructure. It is articulated with the physical space, whilst the symbolic space crowns edifice. The concept of power is represented by a central vertical axis, which connects the five spaces. Vertically, inter-dimensional relations account for relations of incertitude, dominant or otherwise, as well as reveal the variability of the position of each actor from a dimension to the other, the line linking together the different points symbolizing the power of the actor. This model also involves analyzing the variables of the configuration to account for the parameters of change both for each field but also for the global structure of power. There are for this purpose 3 double axis of analysis: local/global; war/peace heterogeneity/homogeneity. As far of the former is concerned, as Dussouy feels that a simple dialectic approach would not be sufficient to fully account for complexity, Dussouy resorts to using trialectic logic, involving 3 separate dynamics: assimilating homogeneity, the antagonistic equilibrium of heterogeneity as well as adaptive homogeneity.

16 The revival of geopolitics, from the 1970s onwards, was also marked by the development of empirical geopolitical analysis. Yves Lacoste has attempted to combine the theoretical foundations of both geography and history, and rather than developing a geopolitical theory, he has focused on developing a methodology for geopolitical analysis (Claval, 2000; Hepple 2000). Such approach is characterized by a number of specific features. This is first the use of maps, often in the form of what Lacoste has named diatopes that is a type of representation formed by the superposition on the same graph of maps using different scales, which are intended conceptually to be to Geographers and Space, what diachronicity is to Historians and Time. Often resorting to different levels of spatial analysis, from the small to the large scale, Lacoste

has developed a classification of spatial sets in eight levels of spatial analysis. There is clearly an emphasis on him frequently resorts to using comparisons of scales as well as the study of the intersections of spatial sets. Whilst there is clearly an emphasis in regional questions in the work of Lacoste, he has nevertheless more recently been dealing with more global vistas (Lacoste, 2006).

17 A second form of geopolitical analysis based on an empirical approach is to be found in the work of scholars who are looking at mental maps and geopolitical visions. In a pioneering study, Alan Henrikson (1980) had suggested the pertinence of studying the 'mental maps' or 'cognitive maps of foreign policy makers. In *National Identity and Geopolitical Visions*, Dutch Political Geographer Gertjan Dijkink (1996) has shown how illuminating a discourse-based analysis of the geopolitical visions could be to understanding of the national experience of place, by conducting a series of very stimulating study cases. Building on his definition of a geopolitical vision as 'any idea concerning the relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy', Dijkink defined an analytical framework, based around five main elements. It was therefore a matter of studying in succession: 1) the justification of both the 'naturalness' of the territorial borders and how a core area continually reinforce national unity; 2) geopolitical codes, a concept borrowed from John Gaddis (1982, ix), who defined it as the 'assumptions about [national] interests in the world, potential threats to them, and feasible responses'; 3) the choice of other countries and their foreign policy as a model to follow or to reject; 4) the idea of a National mission; 5) assumptions about interpersonal (even Divine) forces. Although the focus of Dijkink's study was on national identity, he made clear that it was eminently susceptible to be applied to non-state actors (Dijkink, 1996, p. 11).

## Perspectives

18 During the last twenty years or so, Geopolitical reasoning has come under sustained and continued attack. This is, in particular, the case of a number of Radical Geographers, who rejecting the validity of geopolitical reasoning, have developed an alternative Critical Geopolitics, inspired by postmodernism. (Ó Tuathail, 1996, 2003) It nevertheless seems that a strong case can be made in support of the view that Geopolitics as an intellectual project, interdisciplinary in its essence, constitutes a valid form of policy relevant scientific inquiry. An anchoring notion of using Geopolitics as a thinking/unthinking space may assist in this respect, by facilitating the positive integration of contributions of various fields of research and defining a common framework for geopolitical research. Exploring a common research agenda seems highly pertinent, which could be based on a common framework. From the perspective of geopolitical analysis, two main avenues seem to present a special interest. First, the extremely sophisticated systemic geopolitics model developed by Gérard Dussouy offers very interesting possibilities, which deserve to be explored further. Second, potential synergies between the different approaches and the possibility of bringing them together within an integrative framework, also deserve to be explored further. For instance, the models and methodologies developed by Dussouy, Dijkink and Lacoste, could very well offer an excellent



starting point in this respect. Such a framework could combine three complementary modes of analysis, which would envisage concomitantly the geopolitical systemic configuration (ie the 'observed system'), the geopolitical culture of key agents (ie the 'observing systems'), and finally specific geopolitical situations, by placing them in contextual perspective. Crossing theoretical divides may however present some serious difficulties, in particular of an epistemological nature. This should however not deter from further explorations of what could, or should, be a fruitful research agenda for Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century? Encouraging both empirical research and a sustained reflection on theoretical and methodological issues seems to be a way forward.

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