3

Rethinking Geopolitics

Statesmen and women cannot devise prudent policies if they do not have a sound understanding of where their country stands in relation to the rest of the world. Certainly, such leaders need a map – a map that tells them about their state's geographic location, its maritime access routes and the size of its territory compared to other regional powers. However, this basic information is not sufficient for good statecraft. To devise effective policies, they need to consider questions regarding the state's relative position *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world, including how populous the state is compared to its neighbours, how strong its military capabilities are, whether the state's military will be able to fend off an emerging regional power that is threatening to alter the global balance of power and whether there are alternative passageways through which essential commodities can be supplied to the state in case of a closure of the regular trade routes the state uses.

Such questions can be answered through geopolitics. Geopolitics has been traditionally defined as the study of how geographic factors (such as boundaries, natural resources etc.) impact politics, particularly political relationships among states. It looks at the power dynamics among states seeking to control territory and to acquire reliable access to strategically important locations and resources.[1] Looking at international relations from a geopolitical point of view leads to strategic prescriptions that have a strong focus on geographical realities. This chapter reviews both traditional and contemporary conceptualisations of geopolitics. In doing so, it highlights the need for a new and more comprehensive approach to geopolitical analysis.

3.1 Traditional Concepts of Geopolitics

Formerly, geography – the static physical features of our planet – was the major ingredient of geopolitics, and some of the early theorists had strong backgrounds in geography and the natural sciences. Increasingly, however, the field has been overtaken by social scientists focusing on human action and socio-economic systems to determine international power relationships.[2] Nevertheless, scholars such as Saul Cohen and Stephen Walt have been reintegrating the study of geography into their geopolitical analyses. As the description of their approach in Table 3.1 suggests, both place major emphasis on the geographic location of states to determine power relationships.

Historically, the study of geopolitics has had its ups and downs. Following its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, geopolitics developed into a respectable 'science' in the early twentieth century, as a series of competing geopolitical hypotheses and theories circulated among academics, military strategists and politicians. After the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, geopolitics came into disrepute. The concept became strongly associated with Germany and Japan's expansionist policies (the attempt to colonise territories for access to more resources and strategic world dominance). The study of geopolitics appeared less relevant for a while during the Cold War, during which the Northern Hemisphere remained rather static, carefully divided between the US and Soviet spheres of dominance and influence. The nuclear stalemate between the world's only two superpowers prevented open territorial competition in the Northern Hemisphere, although competition over resources and strategic locations occurred in the Southern Hemisphere through proxy wars. The end of the Cold War and the resulting regional fragmentation and new multipolar power dynamics led to a revival of geopolitical thinking in politics and in academia.[3] The following table provides a concise overview of some of the key concepts of geopolitics listed in chronological order.

3.2 Contemporary Critiques of the Geopolitical Approach

One frequent criticism of classical concepts of geopolitics is that the emphasis on geography can lead to an overly deterministic view of world politics. It is as if to say that the natural environment in which

Table 3.1 Concepts of Geopolitics[4]

AUTHOR	CONCEPT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
Aristotle (384-322 BCE)	**Natural environment impacts individuals and societies**	- Natural environment helps determine an individual's choice of occupation, which in turn impacts the type of political arrangement people choose - Heterogeneous territory leads to heterogeneity among inhabitants, which makes it difficult to build a united and peaceful state - Isolated geographic location of a state fosters longevity and stability, as the state is protected from military attacks and revolutionary ideas coming from abroad
Jean Bodin (1530-1596)	**Climatic theories**	- Natural environment shapes human character and influences regime types of political communities
Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914)	**Importance of sea power in world politics**	- Most important ingredient of a state's international power is a strong navy, control of long coastlines and significant ports - Expected rivalry over world dominance to take place between Russian land power and British sea power in Asia, and argued that Britain and the United States together could surround Eurasia from key bases and keep Russian power in check

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Table 3.1 (continued)

AUTHOR	CONCEPT	SHORT DESCRIPTION
Rudolph Kjellen (1864-1922)	**Geopolitics**	- Coined the term 'geopolitics' in 1899, defined as the "science of the state", which, in practice, he believed to be mostly the science of war, as he saw political process to be spatially determined
Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904)	**Organic theory**	- Like organisms, states compete with each other to increase their living space (*Lebensraum*) in order to thrive
Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947)	**Heartland theory**	- Rivalries between states will shift from the sea to the interior of continents - Most important area to be contested will be control over the northern and interior parts of Eurasia ('Pivot Area' of world politics), including important river networks to the seas and lakes - Germany, Russia and China are well-positioned to gain control of the Pivot Area and dominate maritime powers
General Karl Haushofer (1869-1946)	**Theory of pan regions**	- World consists of three blocs of power: (1) Anglo-America, United States as core (with periphery of Latin America); (2) Europe, Germany as core (with periphery of Africa and India); and (3) Japan (with periphery of Southeast Asia) - Advocated that Germany, as Europe's leading power, would expand its sphere of domination eastwards (ideas taken up by Nazi Germany)
Nicholas Spykman (1893-1943)	**Environmental determinism; 'Rimland' theory**	- Northern Hemisphere more important than Southern Hemisphere - Importance of 'Rimland', including Western Europe, Middle East, South Asia, South-east Asia and Far East

(*continued*)

Table 3.1 (continued)

Alexander de Seversky (1894-1974)	**Importance of air power (air supremacy equals global control)**	- Whoever controls the skies controls the world - United States and Soviet Union have air dominance over their respective spheres, but have to compete for air dominance over 'Area of Decision' (including Anglo- America, Eurasian heartland, maritime Europe, North Africa, Middle East)
Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980)	**Power politics/ realism**	- A state's power (made up of its economic might, armed forces, demographics, etc.) is more important than its geographic location - Power by its very nature will expand until stopped by countervailing power
George F. Kennan (1904-2005)	**Containment/ industrial base/ peripheral defence**	- Focus defence on the world's major centres of industrial power - Block expansion of aggressive power
Samuel Huntington (1927-2008)	**Clash of civilisations**	- The world's 'hot spots' where wars and hostilities are most likely to occur are located along the fault lines between the world's different civilisations - The wars of the future are most likely to occur among civilisations rather than among states
Saul Cohen (present)	**Geostrategic regions**	- Two main regions: Maritime (dependent on trade) with the United States, Europe and Japan as first-order states or regions; and the Eurasian Continental Realm (interior-directed) with China and the Soviet Union as first-order states

(*continued*)

Table 3.1 (continued)

Immanuel Wallerstein (present)	**World systems theory**	- Geographical division of labour within world economy consisting of three subsystems: (1) core states (advanced economic powers with strong state structures exploiting the periphery); (2) periphery (weak states with little autonomy, often former colonies); semi-peripheral areas (serve as buffers between core and periphery) - System is rigid, almost impossible for countries on the periphery to ever reach the economic level of the core
Thomas P.M. Barnett (present)	**Pentagon's New Map**	- World divided into 'Functioning Core' and 'Non-Integrating Gap' - Need for 'Global Transaction Strategy' to connect Gap to the Core through civil-military engagement and integration
Stephen Walt (present)	**Balance of threat/loss-of-strength gradient/ offshore balancing**	- Geographic proximity strongly affects threat perception between two states - States balance against their most proximate threat, so geographically isolated states are less likely to be opposed by antagonistic Alliances
Joseph Nye (present)	**Three-dimensional space**	- International relations today has three dimensions: (1) military realm, unipolar (defined by US military dominance); (2) multipolar economic dimension; (3) 'floating' non-state actors

(*continued*)

Table 3.1 (continued)

Francis Fukuyama (present)	**'End of history'**	- Values of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy will triumph over all other political and economic systems, and they will become a source for international security and stability wherever these values are adopted
Nayef Al-Rodhan (present)	***Meta*-geopolitics**	- Threats to international peace and security can emanate from seven different areas of state power that are interrelated and mutually reinforcing (social and health issues, domestic politics, economics, environment, science and human potential, military and security issues, international diplomacy) - These seven dimensions of state power need to be taken into account in addition to traditional and critical geopolitics

a state happens to be located invariably determines its relative power in the region and its international influence. This claim, however, does not withstand empirical scrutiny. To name just one of many examples, geography has not condemned a country like Switzerland, which has few natural resources, little fertile farmland and is land-locked, to remain an economically backward and poor country isolated from the outside world. Geopolitics, in its narrow, deterministic sense, thus fails to incorporate important human factors in political and economic processes. It also does not account for historical contingencies. Certain political systems may either support or discourage technological development and thus help to determine a state's ability to compete with the outside world or make new territorial conquests. Religious taboos may equally influence the way a nation relates to, and makes use of, its natural environment and geographic location. Sometimes pure luck will lead to a discovery that enables a nation to overcome geographic or geopolitical obstacles and become a powerful state.

The process of globalisation has been radically transforming geostrategy. Arguing from various perspectives, numerous scholars have challenged traditional notions that look at the world as dominated

by threats emanating primarily from the rivalries of states with fixed boundaries.[5] Such notions are a poor foundation for devising a relevant security strategy as external threats to states are now transnational and no longer emanate from states alone.

The liberal international school is the most forceful critic of geography-based explanations of international relations today. The school commonly bases its opposition to geopolitical approaches on two observations. First, globalisation has blurred the distinction between domestic and international politics to the point that distinguishing between the two has become meaningless. Second, today's information-based economy has changed economic power relationships and the ability of states to offer political incentives.[6]

As a result of these two premises, the liberal international school has put forward five main arguments for why geopolitics is an outmoded way of explaining international relations. First, the size of a country's territory is no longer necessarily a measure of its economic and political strength.[7] A country's human potential and technological sophistication allows it to overcome geographic adversity and have a geopolitical relevance that is not reflected by its size and geographic location on a world map. Furthermore, large states with an unstable political system that are plagued by domestic political turmoil are often unable to take advantage of their privileged strategic location or their important strategic resources.

Second, economic capital can often be a more significant measure of a country's power and influence in international affairs than the size of its military.[8] International economics, this argument goes, is slowly replacing geopolitics as the most relevant gauge of actual power relationships in the world.

Third, international politics is no longer a zero-sum game. The accumulation of economic wealth by one state can lead to economic growth in the entire region and can thereby benefit other states as well.[9] In fact, it has been found that the globalisation of production fosters regional economic integration, which in turn can lead to increased regional security cooperation.[10]

Fourth, the conquest of territory through war, especially in the developed world, is no longer of any advantage to states embedded in an international free-market economy. As Stephen G. Brooks argues in his book *Producing Security*, economic success strongly depends on multinational corporations, whose research, development and production of goods are geographically dispersed over a number of countries. Multinational corporations also strongly rely on international

subcontracting, outsourcing and alliances between companies to remain competitive in the global marketplace.[11] Hence, the conquest of territory – and with it industrial bases – is no longer a lucrative way for states in the developed world to increase their economic might due to the broad dispersal of the value chain of modern production. A state engaged in military conquest will suffer economic setbacks, as their actions might provoke an international embargo and will certainly discourage foreign direct investment. A state with a knowledge-based economy that is conquered and controlled by another power is also unlikely to generate the same degree of technological innovation as it did when the state was free and independent.[12]

Fifth, liberal internationalists argue against the geographical or physical determinism of the geopolitical approach. They argue that ideas are more important than geography, as ideas can change the global system and the conflict behaviour of states, while the geographic setting remains the same. An early proponent of the idea that political systems influence conflict behaviour was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his essay, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Proposal', Kant argued that there would be no wars if people, who naturally feel a common human bond with the rest of humanity, were left to govern themselves and formed a pacific federation of free states instead of being the subjects of power-hungry monarchs.[13] Similarly, Woodrow Wilson famously argued that democracies do not go to war with each other. The conflict behaviour of states is thus not just determined by geography but, more importantly, by political systems and ideational factors. The latter has become a popular subject of investigation for political scientists. In particular, the school of critical geopolitics illuminates the transformative power of perceptions and ideas in international relations. The following section will look at this school of thought in more detail.

3.3 Critical Geopolitics

Critics of traditional concepts of geopolitics, whether they emphasise geography or social scientific aspects to explain the dynamics of international politics, argue that representations and perceptions of states and different population groups also shape international dynamics. A new school of thought called *critical geopolitics* has formed around the notion that geographic representations of the world are highly subjective. The school is based on the postmodern deconstructivist notion that no text or term possesses an intrinsic and fixed meaning, and that all concepts

used to interpret the world are just discourses imposed by a dominant ideology, class, gender or race.[14] Proponents of critical geopolitics would thus stress the importance of recognising that leaders of the world's most powerful and influential states shape the way we see international politics. Countries that are on friendly terms with the United States, for instance, are likely to adopt US perceptions of which states are posing a threat to international security. It is no coincidence, for example, that the US president's narrative of the world is more influential than that of a poor state in the global South.[15] In other words, the most powerful states in the world tend to be able to impose their views of international political relationships on the rest of the world.

Gearóid Ó Tuathail was the first systematic proponent of this new school of thought and referred to geopolitics as an unstable and historically contingent concept.[16] As he explains in one article, geopolitics is a 'historically ambiguous and unstable concept'.[17] Geographical space and the world map are represented differently in different historical periods. For Tuathail, a geographic survey cannot be separated from a strategic agenda. In other words, drawing maps is, by its very nature, an act of interpreting and representing physical reality.[18]

Critical geopolitics thus deals with perceptions and interpretations of global processes. The school argues that geography is not an objective science. Our location, as well as our gender and social status, help shape the way we interpret geographical space. Critical geopolitics further argues that factors such as race, class and gender help shape the way individuals are affected by, and cope with, geopolitical processes, be they wars or changes in the global economy.[19] Feminist scholars, such as Donna Haraway, have argued that women and children experience geopolitical processes, such as wars or geo-economic processes, in a different way from men. For instance, women in the South are usually less mobile than men and thus can take less advantage of migration opportunities related to globalisation.[20] For individuals on the ground, geopolitical and geo-economic processes are much more personalised. Looking at these diverse personal trajectories thus gives a much more complex and contradictory picture of international processes than the macro-view of geographical space and power relationships offered by traditional geopolitical analysis.[21]

Critical geopolitics distinguishes between three different levels of perceptions and descriptions of global processes: formal, practical and popular. Formal refers to the theoretical and systematic way academics explain geopolitics. Depending on the theory or school of thought adopted by the scholar, a slightly different interpretation of geopolitical

relationships will result. If one believes, for instance, that economic factors are what mostly determine geopolitical relationships, one would emphasise economic power centres like the United States and the EU. If demographic factors are emphasised, however, countries like China and India would figure more prominently when representing geopolitical dynamics.[22] To give another example, during the Cold War, US scientists significantly contributed to the portrayal of the world as being divided between the free world under the leadership of the United States and an evil empire dominated by the communist Soviet Union, a portrayal that shaped the geopolitical worldview of an entire generation.[23]

Practical geopolitics describes the way policy makers and political leaders represent international political dynamics. An extension of this level is politicians' use of maps and geopolitical interpretations as propaganda tools. The use of maps in political propaganda can often give a false impression of objectivity to the target audience. As L.K.D. Kristof explained in 1960, 'A poster with a true or pseudo-geopolitical map is … attractive and seems to tell merely a self-evident truth. Men have already learned to distrust words and figures, but they have not yet learned to distrust maps.'[24]

Popular geopolitics involves the way the media and popular culture represent geopolitical processes and thus shapes how ordinary citizens perceive global politics.[25] During the Cold War, for example, Western cartoons, movies and the mass media reinforced the notion of a world divided into two camps and the portrayal of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as a dark and backward area from which all kinds of threats might emerge. In recent history, the Muslim world is portrayed in Western cartoons, movies and mass media as an antagonistic and backward area from which terrorist threats might emerge, thus perpetuating Western typecasting of the Islamic world as a monolithic religious and political entity. This has dangerous implications for intercultural relations, which may even give rise to justifications of foreign interference, including military invasion in Muslim countries.[26] As Robert A. Saunders rightly remarks, 'in the contemporary realm of international relations, images have been weaponized in an unending war of ideas'.[27] His book *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* offers a good example of how popular culture, new media and public diplomacy may impact nation branding and shape national image and statecraft.

Of course, all three types of discourses are interrelated. Politicians borrow some of their concepts from academics, academics can be influenced by popular culture, and the media can help to shape the perceptions of policy makers. We all use abstract and simplified images

that help us to make sense of the world, and these images are influenced by cultural factors. Critical geopolitics therefore maintains that geopolitics is a cultural construct and that international dynamics are not quantifiable scientific processes that can be objectively described.

3.4 Strategic Geography

The political scientists Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy coined the term *strategic geography*. In contrast to *geopolitics*, this term more specifically describes 'the tactical elements of geography that contribute to grand strategy'.[28] According to the authors, strategic geography is the study of how access to, or control over, land, water and air space impacts a state's national security and economic prosperity. The concept incorporates all areas of modern geography. On the one hand, there is *physical geography*, which describes the topographical make-up of continents. It also includes the natural resources that exist in different geographic areas. The physical geographic make-up of the world changes slowly – natural resources may become depleted due to human activity; rivers may change course or be diverted as a result of dam projects.

On the other hand, strategic geography includes *human* geography, which describes factors that impact geographic space as a result of human activities, including political, economic and military activities. The *political* geography of a country or region describes the decision-making apparatus that governs the people within a defined geographic space. Wars of conquest or internal political revolutions can dramatically change the political geography of a region, as can the break-up of an empire or the partition of a single political entity into two or more separate states. Mass migration can alter the politics of an entire region. New alliances or shifts in alliances can also change the landscape of international politics rather dramatically. One example would be the rift that developed within the Sino-Soviet communist bloc and the subsequent rapprochement between the United States and China under US President Richard Nixon in the 1970s.[29]

Economic geography refers to a country's industrial and rural infrastructure and trade patterns.[30] Changing market conditions, the discovery of valuable natural resources on a state's territory, a radically new technological innovation or the blockage of an important trade route (or choke point) can have a decisive impact on countries and regions and may affect internal politics, international political alignments or even provoke a war. One current issue in this context, which will be

discussed in more detail later, is the international politics surrounding the construction of oil pipelines from the land-locked Caspian basin to ports on open waters. While Russia, of course, wants the pipelines to run through its territory, the United States and the EU are lobbying Central Asian states to build pipelines through Turkey. The route chosen will have an important impact on the economies and economic security of Europe, as well as on the countries that the pipelines cross.[31]

Military geography, another important subcategory of human geography, describes the military capabilities of a state and the way these assets are deployed. New developments in weapons technology can change the military geography of countries and regions. The development of new aircraft and missile technologies, for instance, has decreased the importance of geographical obstacles such as distance or high mountain chains. A change in political regime might similarly alter a state's military posture from a defensive to a more offensive one. Taking into account both physical and human geography and its many subcategories, strategic geography provides a more nuanced way of studying how access to, or control over, physical space influences power relationships among states.

Since the coining of the term 'strategic geography' by Kemp and Harkavy, a lot of work has been done on military, economic and human geography.[32] Together, these works highlight the need for state leaders to take into account the military, economic and human realities of their geographic environment. Still, and as I illustrate further below, there are even more factors that state leaders must incorporate in their geostrategic deliberations.

3.5 The Continued Relevance of Geopolitics

There are strong arguments to support the notion that classical geopolitics is outdated and of little use to students of international relations today. Globalisation has multiplied interrelationships between states and has made national boundaries porous. Today, geographic boundaries between states, such as rivers or mountain chains, tell us little about a particular state's relative power, safety or level of international integration. Furthermore, the development of long-range missiles, strategic bombers and air-borne fuel tankers has made distance and geographical obstacles less of a problem for war planners. De-territorialised threats emanating from cyberspace further call into question the use of a 'territorial' paradigm.[33]

I would argue, however, that states will continue to be constrained by the geographic limitations of their territories, even if less so than in the recent past. Discounting geography entirely and focusing exclusively on social factors leaves a skewed picture of international relations. Despite the human ability to overcome a range of environmental and geographic obstacles, the natural environment and a state's location in terms of control of important coastlines or access to waterways nevertheless remains important.[34] Although it is true that today's economy is, to a large extent, based on knowledge, the resources and industry that enable the production of software in the first place remain the basis for economic wealth and power. A technologically advanced country still cannot thrive without reliable access to oil and an industrial infrastructure, whether at home or abroad. These important industries and resources remain spatially distributed. The fact that they are distributed unevenly around the world makes geopolitics a highly relevant component of strategy in the twenty-first century.[35] Geopolitical analysis therefore remains important for statecraft yet must be adjusted to capture the changed realities of the twenty-first century. New features that contribute to state power today must be added to any map featuring geographical details and resource distribution among and within states.

The argument that the process of globalisation erodes state borders to a level of irrelevance and thus renders geography a superfluous concept in the national strategic thinking of states lacks evidence. Certainly, threats to states today are often transnational and asymmetrical. Most developed states fear terrorist or guerrilla attacks more than conventional military attacks by neighbouring states. However, the example of the US war against terrorism that followed the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 demonstrates the continuing importance of state actors in international relations. Clearly, the attack was perpetrated by a small group of non-state actors.[36] Furthermore, ideologically minded non-state actors can succeed in taking over formerly state-controlled territories and consequently become a spatial threat – or at least spatially relevant – in geopolitical terms. The example of Islamic State shows how quickly a non-spatial threat can turn into a spatial one.

The liberal economic argument that the interconnectedness of global commerce and states' strong mutual economic dependence raises the economic cost of war to an unacceptable level does not rest on solid empirical foundations. History has shown that people fight wars for reasons other than economic enrichment. As one author puts it: 'People are still attached to their culture, their language, and a place called

home. And they will sing for home, cry for home, fight for home, and die for home. Which is why globalisation does not, and will not, end geopolitics.'[37]

The argument has been made that globalisation promotes increased intercultural understanding and friendships by intensifying interactions between people from different cultures. This purportedly decreases the potential for demonising foreign cultures and reduces the risk of conflicts between states. Nevertheless, historical experience has also shown us that wars often take place between states that share a strong cultural bond. The First World War is a case in point. The war was fought between major European powers that all shared strong cultural affinities, similar cultural tastes and religious beliefs, and they all had engaged in intense cultural borrowing over the centuries. Despite the intense mixing of cultures brought about through the process of globalisation, special interstate politics cannot be left out of the picture. State units, individual states' strategic needs and power dynamics between states need to be included in any accurate analysis of international relations.[38]

Moreover, geopolitics does not need to be geographically deterministic. In fact, many contemporary geopoliticians acknowledge that it is not geography *per se*, but rather the interaction between the natural environment and human entrepreneurship that determines the geostrategic power of a particular state. Modern geopoliticians understand that the strategic location of a country may help shape its political values and systems, but also that it does not determine them. Geopolitics does not claim to be a natural science and has no aspiration to be one. As Kristof noted: 'The modern geo-politician does not look at the world map in order to find out what nature *compels* us to do but what nature *advises* us to do, given our preferences.'[39]

Today, technological sophistication, knowledge and the ability to spread influential information contribute enormously to a country's power. Even so, a spatial analysis of the world continues to serve as the foundation for grand strategy in the information society of the twenty-first century. Besides mountains and strategically significant natural resources, a geopolitical analysis of today's world may also include the spatial concentration of software and human resources.[40] Just as a spatial analysis of how natural resources are concentrated across the world's different continents has provided clues to classical geopoliticians about global power relationships, so does a spatial analysis of how software resources are globally distributed demonstrate where today's power

centres lie. As long as elements of state power are distributed unequally across the globe (whether they be natural resources, national armies, industry or software), geopolitics remains relevant.

We nonetheless require a new geopolitical analysis tool to do justice to today's increasingly complex and nuanced interaction between geography, international politics and international relations. The following chapter thus proposes *meta-geopolitics* as a new geopolitical framework that more accurately represents the spatial distribution of hard-, soft-, smart- and just-power resources and international power dynamics in a globalised world.