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HOW DOES THE STUDY OF GEOPOLITICS HELP US UNDERSTAND THE WORLD?

Geopolitics is the interplay among geography, power, politics, and international relations on Earth's surface. Political science and international relations tend to focus on governmental institutions, systems, and interactions. Geopolitics brings locational considerations, environmental contexts, territorial ideas and arrangements, and spatial assumptions to the fore. Geopolitics helps us understand the spatial power arrangements that shape international relations.

Classical Geopolitics

Classical geopoliticians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally fit into one of two camps: the German school, which sought to explain why certain states are powerful and how to become powerful, and the British/American school, which sought to offer strategic advice by identifying parts of Earth's surface that were particularly important for the maintenance and projection of power. A few geopoliticians tried to bridge the gap, blending the two schools, but for the most part classical geopoliticians who are still writing today are in the British/American school, offering geostrategic perspectives on the world.

The German School

Why are certain states powerful, and how do states become powerful? The first political geographer who studied these issues was the German professor Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Influenced by the writings of Charles Darwin, Ratzel postulated that the state resembles a biological organism whose life cycle extends from birth through maturity and, ultimately, decline and death. To prolong its existence, the state requires nourishment, just as an organism needs food. Such nourishment is provided by the acquisition of territories that provide adequate space for the members of the state's dominant nation to thrive, which is what Ratzel called *lebensraum*. If a state is confined within permanent and static boundaries and deprived of overseas domains, Ratzel argued, it can atrophy. Territory is thus seen as the state's essential, life-giving force.

Ratzel's theory was based on his observations of states in the nineteenth century, including the United States. It was so speculative that it might have been forgotten if some of Ratzel's German followers in the 1930s had not translated his abstract writings into policy recommendations that ultimately led to Nazi expansionism.

The British/American School

Not long after the publication of Ratzel's initial ideas, other geographers began looking at the overall organization of power in the world, studying the physical geographic map with a view toward determining the locations of most strategic places on Earth. Prominent among them was the Oxford University geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder (1861–1947). In 1904, he published an article titled “The Geographical Pivot of History” in the Royal Geographical Society's *Geographical Journal*. That article became one of the most intensely debated geographic publications of all time.

Mackinder was concerned with power relationships at a time when Britain had acquired a global empire through its strong navy. To many of his contemporaries, the oceans—the paths to colonies and trade—were the key to world domination, but Mackinder disagreed. He concluded that a land-based power, not a sea power, would ultimately rule the world. His famous article contained a lengthy appraisal of the largest and most populous landmass on Earth—Eurasia (Europe and Asia together). At the heart of Eurasia, he argued, lay an impregnable, resource-rich “pivot area” extending from eastern Europe to eastern Siberia (Fig. 8.21). Mackinder issued a warning: if this pivot area became influential in Europe, a great empire could be formed.



Figure 8.21 The Heartland Theory.

The Pivot Area/Heartland, the Inner Crescent/Rimland, and the World Island, following the descriptions of Halford Mackinder.

Mackinder later renamed his pivot area the heartland, and his warning became known as the heartland theory. In his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), Mackinder (calling Eurasia “the World Island”) issued a stronger warning to the winners of World War I, stating:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland

Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island

Who rules the World Island commands the World

When Mackinder proposed his **heartland theory**, there was little to foretell the rise of a superpower in the heartland. Russia was in disarray, having recently lost a war against Japan (1905), and was facing revolution. Eastern Europe was fractured. Germany, not Russia, was gaining power. But when the Soviet Union emerged and Moscow controlled over much of Eastern Europe at the end of World War II, the heartland theory attracted renewed attention.

In 1943, Mackinder wrote a final paper expressing concern that the Soviet Union, under Stalin, would seek to exert control over the states of Eastern Europe. He offered strategies for keeping the Soviets in check, including avoiding the expansion of the Heartland into the Inner Crescent (Fig. 8.21) and creating an alliance around the North Atlantic to join the forces of land and sea powers against the Heartland. His ideas were not embraced by many at the time, but within ten years of publication, the United States began its containment policy to stop the expansion of the Soviet Union, and the United States, Canada, and Western Europe formed an alliance called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Further proof of the importance of Mackinder's legacy can be seen in the fact that, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, his theories enjoy widespread currency in Russian foreign policy circles.

Influence of Geopoliticians on Politics

Ratzel and Mackinder are only two of many geopoliticians who influenced international relations. Their writings, grounded in history, current events, and physical geography, sounded logical and influenced many politicians, and in some ways still do. NATO still exists and has not invited Russia to join the military alliance, but it has extended membership to 28 states since the end of the Cold War, including eastern European states. NATO has a working partnership with former republics of the Soviet Union, though the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 produced a chilling effect on NATO's eastward expansion.

Despite the staying power of geopolitical theories, geopolitics declined as a formal area of study after World War II. Because of the influence Ratzel's theory had on Hitler and because another geopolitician, Karl Haushofer, also influenced Hitler, the term *geopolitics* acquired a negative connotation. For some decades after World War II, the term was in such disrepute that few political geographers, even those studying power relationships, would identify themselves as students of

geopolitics. Time, along with more balanced perspectives, has reinstated geopolitics as a significant field of study, encompassing efforts to understand the spatial and territorial dimensions of power relationships past, present, and future.

Critical Geopolitics

Rather than focusing their attention on predicting and prescribing, many current students of geopolitics focus on revealing and explaining the underlying spatial assumptions and territorial perspectives of international actors. Political geographers Gearoid O'Tuathail and John Agnew refer to those actors in the most powerful states, the core states, as “intellectuals of statecraft.” The basic concept behind **critical geopolitics** is that intellectuals of statecraft construct ideas about geographical circumstances and places, these ideas influence and reinforce their political behaviors and policy choices, and then affect what happens and how most people interpret what happens.

O'Tuathail has focused particular attention on American geopolitical reasoning—examining speeches and statements by U.S. intellectuals of statecraft. He has drawn attention to how several American leaders often spatialize politics into a world of “us” and “them.” Political leaders can shape how their constituents see places and organize international space in their minds. By drawing on American cultural logic and certain representations of America, O'Tuathail argues that presidents have repeatedly defined an “us” that is pro-democracy, independent, self-sufficient, and free and a “them” that is in some way against all of these things.

During the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan coined the term *Evil Empire* for the Soviet Union and represented the United States as “the shining city on a hill.” During ensuing presidencies, terrorism replaced the Soviet Union as the “they.” Sounding remarkably similar, Democratic President William J. Clinton and Republican President George W. Bush justified military actions against terrorists. In 1998, President Clinton justified American military action in Sudan and Afghanistan as a response to terrorist plans by Osama bin Laden by noting that the terrorists “come from diverse places but share a hatred for democracy, a fanatical glorification of violence, and a horrible distortion of their religion, to justify the murder of innocents. They have made the United States their adversary precisely because of what we stand for and what we stand against.” Immediately after September 11, President George W. Bush made a similar claim, arguing that “They [the terrorists] stand against us because we stand in their way.” In 2002, President Bush again explained, “I've said in the past that nations are either with us or against us in the war on terror.”

Statements such as these are rooted in a particular geopolitical perspective on the world—one that divides the globe into opposing camps. That much may seem obvious, as there are clear ideological fault lines between an organization such as al-Qaeda and a state such as the United States. But critical geopolitics seeks to move beyond such differences to explore the spatial ideas and understandings that undergird particular political perspectives and that shape policy approaches.

One of the most powerful geopolitical ideas since Samuel Huntington published *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1996 posits an “Islamic World.” September 11, 2001 amplified the idea of a threatening Islamic realm. The U.S. government, concerned about al-Qaeda's influence in the Islamic World, justified military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The idea of a unified “Islamic World” appears in the words of commentators on 24-hour news channels. The problem with such conceptions is that the “Islamic World” is tremendously diverse, culturally, and religiously, and some of the most intractable conflicts of recent times have been fought within the Islamic World. Belief in or fear of a unified “Islamic World” is not any more rational than belief in or fear of a unified “Christian World.” Regardless, if geopolitical ideas are believed, they shape the policies that are pursued and how we perceive what happens on the ground. An important task for geographers, then, is to understand the ideological roots and implications of geopolitical reasoning by intellectuals of statecraft.

Geopolitical World Order

Political geographers study geopolitical world orders, which are the temporary periods of stability in the way international politics is conducted. For example, during the Cold War, the geopolitical world order was bipolar—the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact satellites versus the United States and its close allies in Western Europe. In the past, after a stable geopolitical world order broke down, the world went through a transition, eventually settling into a new geopolitical world order. Noted political geographers Peter J. Taylor and Colin Flint argue that at the end of World War II, five possible orders could have

emerged among the three major powers, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Each could have created its own bloc with its own allies; the three could have come together under the United Nations; or three possible alliances could have occurred—the United States and USSR against the UK, the United States and the UK against the USSR, or the UK and USSR against the United States. What emerged was the bipolar world order of the Cold War: the United States and the UK against the USSR.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the world entered a transition period, again opening up a variety of different geopolitical possibilities. Some politicians spoke optimistically about a new geopolitical world order where a standoff of nuclear terror between two superpowers would no longer determine the destinies of states. Supposedly, this new geopolitical order would be shaped by the forces that connect nations and states; by supranational entities like the European Union (discussed in the next section of this chapter); and, should any state violate international rules of conduct, by multilateral military action. The risks of nuclear war would recede, and negotiation would replace confrontation. When a United Nations coalition of states led by the United States in 1991 drove Iraq out of Kuwait, the framework of a New World Order seemed to be taking shape. The Soviet Union, which a few years before was the United States' principal geopolitical antagonist, endorsed the operation. Arab as well as non-Arab forces helped repel the invaders.

Soon, however, doubts and uncertainties began to cloud hopes for a mutually cooperative geopolitical world order. Although states were more closely linked to each other than ever before, national self-interest still acted as a powerful force. Nations wanted to become states, and many did, as the number of United Nations members increased from 159 in 1990 to 184 by 1993 and 192 as of 2006. At the same time, a variety of organizations not tied to specific territories posed a new challenge to the territorially defined state. The number and power of economic and social networks that extend across state borders increased. The new world order includes nonstate organizations with political agendas that are not channeled through states and are often spatially diffuse.

Some hoped to see a geopolitical world order based on **unilateralism**, with the United States in a position of hard-power dominance and with allies of the United States following rather than joining the political decision-making process. The U.S. military budget is as large as all the military budgets of all other states in the world combined. The United States' controversial invasion of Iraq significantly undermined its influence in many parts of the globe. Southeast Asian states that had long been oriented toward the United States began to turn away. A significant rift developed across the Atlantic between the United States and some European countries, and anti-Americanism surged around the world. The processes of globalization, the diffusion of nuclear weapons, the emergence of China and India as increasingly significant powers, and the growth of networked groups and organizations, including terrorist groups, also challenged American unilateralism.

When geopolitical strategists and intellectuals of statecraft predict future geopolitical orders, they often assume that individual states will continue to be the dominant actors in the international arena. Yet as we discuss later in this chapter, many of the same forces that worked against American unilateralism have undermined some of the traditional powers of the state. The rise of regional blocs could lead to a new multipolar order, with key clusters of states functioning as major geopolitical nodes. Alternatively, as we will discuss in Chapter 9, global cities may gain increasing power over issues typically addressed by states.



Read a major newspaper (in print or online) and look for a recent statement by a world political leader regarding international politics. Using the concept of critical geopolitics, determine what geopolitical view of the world the leader has—how does he or she view and divide up the world spatially?

People and Places: East Timor: Tourism and Development

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