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# GEOPOLITICS

AN OVERVIEW OF CONCEPTS AND EMPIRICAL  
EXAMPLES FROM INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



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## **SUMMARY**

Geopolitical research is frequently portrayed as a dead end. To some scholars it appears that in the 21st century geography is largely scenery, all but irrelevant to the most important issues of grand strategy.

This working paper aims to revitalise geopolitics, reflecting both on the critique of the subject and the strengths that have characterised it for more than a century. It is argued that geographical conditions constitute a set of opportunities and constraints, a structure that is independent of agency. General patterns and long-term processes can be aptly explained by this structure but geopolitics is not a theory of state behaviour or foreign policy.

Understanding specific phenomena that occur in international relations therefore requires taking into consideration non-geographical factors. Such a combination of geographical and non-geographical factors provides sound explanations, as several examples demonstrate: China's projection of power into the Indian Ocean, South Africa's approach to the political crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008, Iran's maritime strategy and the poor integration of Colombia and South America.

Given that geopolitics is about analysing international relations (or politics) for its geographical content, all those committed to geopolitics should concentrate on the three guiding questions: Do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome? If yes, do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome significantly? If yes, how, meaning in combination with which other factors do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome?

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Nicholas Spykman once wrote that ‘ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed’.<sup>2</sup> Due to their persistence, Spykman regarded geographical conditions – the physical reality that states face – as being decisive for international relations. This type of geopolitical thinking has been strongly criticised, more recently by constructivists such as John Agnew, Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail,<sup>3</sup> and for decades by realists. In an article recently published in the journal *Orbis*, Christopher Fettweis argues that geopolitics suffers from major descriptive, prescriptive and predictive deficiencies. According to Fettweis, geopolitics is therefore unable to produce meaningful scholarly work.<sup>4</sup> It has become obsolete, as he claims in an article published earlier in *Comparative Strategy*.<sup>5</sup>

Yet there are several scholars who adhere to geopolitical explanations in their research on international relations. Michael Klare, for example, focuses on the demand, supply and spatial characteristics of resources in order to explain conflicts amongst states.<sup>6</sup> Robert Kaplan argues that we must study ‘the outside environment faced by every state when determining its own strategy’.<sup>7</sup> Others concentrate on territorial strategies, reasoning for instance that China and India are likely to clash because the ‘string of pearls’ – that is, a line of commercial and military facilities constructed by the Chinese along the shores of the Indian Ocean – cuts through sea lines of communication in the

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1 This working paper is based on a presentation given by the author at a roundtable on ‘Geopolitics, Geoeconomics and Foreign Policy Analysis’ at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 6 October 2015. The author would like to thank the participants of the roundtable for their valuable comments. A shorter version of the working paper will be published under the title ‘Geographical Conditions and Political Outcomes’ in *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 35, no. 6.

2 Nicholas J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, 1942), p. 41.

3 The most important critiques of geopolitics by constructivists are: Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John A. Agnew, ‘Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy’, *Political Geography*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1992), pp. 190–204; Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, ‘Rethinking Geopolitics: Towards a Critical Geopolitics’, in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–15.

4 Christopher J. Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards: Classical Geopolitics, Then and Now’, *Orbis*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2015), pp. 233–48.

5 Christopher J. Fettweis, ‘Revisiting Mackinder and Angell: The Obsolescence of Great Power Geopolitics’, *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 109–22.

6 Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Holt, 2002); Michael T. Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America’s Growing Petroleum Dependency* (London: Penguin, 2004); Michael T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* (New York: Holt, 2009).

7 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 60.

Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Bengal that are vital for India.<sup>8</sup> In his critique of geopolitics, Fettweis suggests that ‘everyone agrees that geography matters [...] but determining exactly how the chessboard affects the game has proven elusive’.<sup>9</sup> It is confusing why Fettweis – and many others along with him – concludes that we should stop thinking about how geographical conditions influence international relations. Even if one thinks that the findings of geopolitics have been dissatisfying so far, the apparent importance of geographical conditions – which those who criticise geopolitics from a realist perspective acknowledge – should encourage us to refine geopolitical thinking.

In contrast to other publications in defence of geopolitics, this working paper does not investigate whether the conclusions drawn by scholars such as Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman were (and still are) accurate.<sup>10</sup> Instead, this paper shows that geopolitical thinking has much to contribute to our understanding of international relations insofar as it allows us to focus on crucial factors that are neglected by other approaches: naturally given and man-made material structures in the geographical space. It also demonstrates that those who criticise geopolitics misunderstand in particular the classical branch in numerous ways. Nonetheless, critics such as Fettweis do hint at some actual shortcomings of geopolitical thinking. This paper therefore advances a refined version of geopolitics, based on classical and contemporary geopolitics. The three pillars of the version of geopolitics proposed here are:<sup>11</sup>

- Geographical conditions must not be seen as an irreversible fate. They constitute a set of opportunities and constraints, meaning a structure independent of agency.
- General patterns and long-term processes can be aptly explained by geographical conditions, but understanding specific phenomena that occur in international relations requires taking into consideration intervening non-geographical factors.
- It is helpful to trace processes and to reveal causal mechanisms, concentrating on the role of geography therein, so as to show that geographical conditions matter and in what way.

In order to demonstrate that new insights can be gained from the revitalised version of geopolitics developed in this paper, empirical examples from international relations are given. The purpose of the respective sections in this working paper is to show that geographical conditions are highly relevant for some major phenomena in present-day international relations. As just noted, such explanations would remain incomplete if they neglected intervening non-geographical factors. Hence, by shedding light on the interplay between geographical and non-geographical factors, the examples given here

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8 An example of this line of thinking is: David Scott, ‘The Great Power “Great Game” between India and China: “The Logic of Geography”’, *Geopolitics*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2008), pp. 1–26.

9 Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards’, p. 248.

10 A good example of this line of reasoning is Colin S. Gray, ‘In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years on’, *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2004), pp. 1–23.

11 Sören Scholvin, *The Geopolitics of Regional Power: Geography, Economics and Politics in Southern Africa* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

illustrate that we can learn a lot from incorporating geographical conditions into our analyses of international relations, while recognising that geopolitics remains a valid and useful discipline.

This working paper consists of three sections. First, an overview of the classical fundamentals of geopolitics is provided, and leading and misleading tracks are delineated. The second section deals with present-day geopolitics and how it advances the classical approach. The third section focuses on whence the three pillars of geopolitics listed above are derived, and discusses the prospects for future geopolitical research.

## GEOPOLITICS IN THE PAST

Geopolitical reasoning dates back to ancient Greece. Aristotle derived the respective political systems of the Greek city states and their neighbouring empires and tribes from climatic conditions. Similar ideas were prominent in France during the Renaissance. Immanuel Kant also linked presumed characteristics of peoples to climatic factors. In modern social science this line of thinking received a boost when geopolitics became the predominant approach in research on international relations. German geographer Friedrich Ratzel conceptualised states as growing organisms.<sup>12</sup> In an attempt to apply scientific laws from biology to international relations, he argued that states derived their national power – their capacity to survive in the international arena – from the land they controlled. Ratzel's Swedish colleague, Rudolf Kjellén, coined the term geopolitics.<sup>13</sup> He defined it as the science of states as life forms, based on demographic, economic, political, social and geographical factors.

In the inter-war period, Austrian and German disciples of Ratzel and Kjellén advanced geopolitics as a popular science aimed at revising the Treaty of Versailles. Karl Haushofer argued that the German Reich, Italy and Japan did not possess sufficiently large national territories and would be unable to survive if they did not expand.<sup>14</sup> Haushofer and other German geographers sought to actively shape politics according to what they regarded as the geographically given needs of the German Reich.<sup>15</sup> They also advanced partisan models of geopolitical regionalisation, suggesting that the German Reich possessed a natural sphere of influence that covered Africa and Europe. Germany was to be the industrial core of this sphere. Africa and the European periphery should play a subordinate role as providers of raw materials.<sup>16</sup> Adhering to the Darwinist fundamentals laid down by Ratzel and Kjellén, Haushofer and his colleagues believed that weak states pursued defensive strategies and strong states – growing life forms that they were – naturally expanded.<sup>17</sup> What is more, the German school of Geopolitics was ethno-determinist and incorporated ideologies as a causal factor. Haushofer argued that the rise and fall of states not only depended on the living space they controlled, but also on their

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12 Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (München: Oldenbourg, 1897).

13 Rudolf Kjellén, *Staten som livsform* (Stockholm: Geber, 1916).

14 Karl Haushofer, 'Atemweite, Lebensraum und Gleichberechtigung auf Erden', *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1934), pp. 1–14.

15 Karl Haushofer, 'Grundlagen, Wesen und Ziele der Geopolitik', in *Bausteine zur Geopolitik*, ed. Karl Haushofer et al. (Berlin: Vowinckel, 1928), pp. 29–48.

16 Erich Obst, 'Ostbewegung und afrikanische Kolonisation als Teilaufgaben einer abendländischen Großraumpolitik', *Zeitschrift für Erdkunde*, vol. 9, no. 9 (1941), pp. 265–78.

17 Karl Haushofer, *Japan baut sein Reich* (Berlin: Zeitgeschichte-Verlag, 1941); Otto Maul, *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika als Großreich: Länderkunde und Geopolitik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1940).

urge to live.<sup>18</sup> The pan-regions that he and other authors of the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* described were supposedly based on pan-ideas.<sup>19</sup>

American and British scholars conversely explained the long-term courses of international relations in terms of geographical conditions, usually without referring to Social Darwinist thoughts and without adapting their academic findings to political goals. Fettweis correctly points out that early Anglo-American geopolitics also had a climate-racist branch: Ellsworth Huntington, for example, argued that peoples from temperate zones were superior to others because of climatic factors that presumably formed their character.<sup>20</sup> Thoughts on the impact of physio-geographical conditions on the character of peoples were somewhat latent in Anglo-American classical geopolitics. Yet they never dominated the discipline. It was not climate and intellectual capacities but, rather, the effects of locational, geomorphological and topographical conditions for national expansion and national power that were regarded as being essential. Alfred Mahan, the first director of the US Naval War College, pointed out that the failure of France to outcompete Britain in terms of naval power resulted from the fact that France's coast is not conducive to building harbours. France, being located on the European continent, also had to invest in its army and navy, while the British could concentrate on naval power. Moreover, the French naval forces were divided into two arenas: the Atlantic coast and the English Channel, on the one side, and the Mediterranean Sea, on the other. The Royal Navy, conversely, could concentrate its power on a single theatre of operation.<sup>21</sup>

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18 Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans: Studien über die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Geographie und Geschichte* (Heidelberg: Vonwinckel, 1924).

19 Friedrich Paulig, 'Monroe-Doktrin, Panamerika und Völkerbund', *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1930), pp. 319–23; Frank H. Schmolck, 'Der Panamerikanismus von Amerika aus', *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, vol. 14, no. 5 (1937), pp. 381–88.

Concerning German geopolitics it is noteworthy that its proponents, in particular Haushofer, were not grey eminences behind National Socialism. This is best demonstrated by Haushofer's conviction of the merits of an alliance with the Soviet Union and the complete failure of the so-called Working Group on Geopolitics to influence foreign policy and public opinion in Germany in the 1930s (Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "'Kampf um Lebensraum": Zur Rolle des Geopolitikers Karl Haushofer im Dritten Reich', *German Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1981), pp. 79–104.).

20 Ellsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven: Archon, 1915).

21 Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (London: Low, 1890).

Ellen Semple – who went to Leipzig in the late 19th century to attend Ratzel's university lectures – advanced similar ideas, arguing that the coastal geomorphology of the northern Atlantic Ocean, meaning that ocean's numerous inlets and small islands, was favourable to seafaring. Physio-geographical conditions thus helped her to explain the expansion of European powers. Semple also reasoned on the impact of environmental conditions on the human mind (*American History and its Geographic Conditions* (Boston: Mifflin, 1903)), as did her Scottish colleague James Fairgrieve (*Geography and World Power* (London: University of London Press, 1917)). Semple's famous phrase – 'man is a product of the earth's surface' – duly summarises a problematic geodeterminism (*Influences of Geographic Environment: On the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthro-Geography* (New York: Holt, 1911), p. 1).

## China's string of pearls

In 2010 China became the world's major energy consumer. In particular, its oil imports have continued to increase at an impressive rate. Given that roughly 50 per cent of the oil that China imports comes from the Persian Gulf region, the People's Republic has an evident interest in secure maritime transport through the Indian Ocean. Increasing imports of raw materials from Africa (in particular coal, metals and oil) reinforce this interest. China has to react to threats such as piracy off the Horn of Africa. India's naval build-up and the presence of the US navy at chokepoints in Southeast Asia, where China can be cut off from the Indian Ocean, arguably also require a reaction from the Chinese.

China's projection of power into the Indian Ocean is, however, extremely difficult – and this brings us back to Mahan. First of all, the main theatre of operation for the Chinese navy is the Pacific Ocean, with its numerous territorial disputes close to the littoral state of the People's Republic. China's capacities for the Indian Ocean are hence limited. Moreover, China does not possess a coastline of its own on that ocean. The aforementioned chokepoints in Southeast Asia can easily be used to cut off Chinese ships from supplies. In order to be able to operate in the Indian Ocean, the Chinese have thus begun to build and upgrade ports in friendly countries, ranging from Cambodia to Myanmar to Pakistan. The most famous harbours of the so-called string of pearls are Gwadar (Pakistan) and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), which are to be linked to China by land corridors, including pipelines. The envisaged pipelines are strategically important because they would significantly reduce transport time from the Middle Eastern oil suppliers to the People's Republic. They would, of course, also enable China to circumvent the Southeast Asian chokepoints. In the case of Gwadar, potential obstructions by the Indian navy would be reduced to a minimum.

Whereas geographical conditions facilitate our understanding of why China has been building the string of pearls, they do not tell us what its precise effects are. India and think tanks from the United States in particular warn against China's power projection into the Indian Ocean. Kaplan attributes the string of pearls directly to China's quest for secure access to resources.<sup>1</sup> Referring to Mackinder's heartland theory, Kaplan also argues that the People's Republic possesses highly favourable geographical conditions to raise it to the status of a world power.<sup>2</sup> However, the geographical advantages that Kaplan refers to do not necessarily mean that China's rise will be competitive (or even war-prone). The ports that are being built or rehabilitated by the Chinese along the Indian Ocean could serve as economic growth poles, with Chinese companies investing in free-trade zones at these ports, co-operating with local companies and incorporating them into global commodity chains – Gwadar, for example, is already a free-trade zone today.

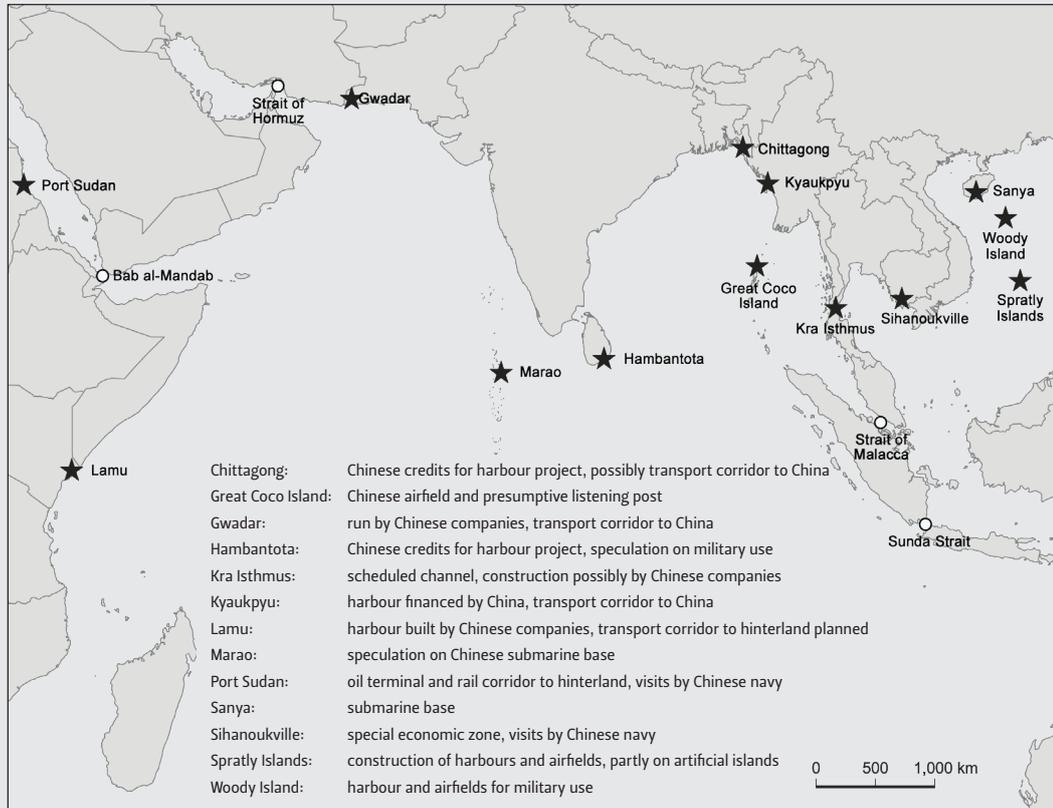
Moreover, caution is needed because the string of pearls is not a security paradigm developed by the Chinese. It was coined by the consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton in 2004 and brought to a larger audience shortly afterwards by the *Washington Post*, which wrongly pictured it as a Chinese security paradigm (and not an analytical concept developed in the

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1 Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).

2 Robert D. Kaplan, 'The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 3 (2010), pp. 22–41.

United States). Chinese politicians speak of the ‘new silk road’, stressing prospects for economic co-operation instead of security issues. This does not mean that the string of pearls falls short as a description of China’s strategy, or that the aforementioned geographical factors are irrelevant. Yet we have to include non-geographical factors in order to gain a complete picture of what the Chinese are doing in the Indian Ocean.



**Map 1: The string of pearls. Source: Author’s own compilation.**

Half a century after Mahan had published his main work, Nicholas Spykman wrote that ‘it is the geographical location of a country and its relations to centers of military power that define its problem[s] of security’.<sup>22</sup> Topography is critical too: landlocked states, island states and states that possess land and sea borders pursue different strategies in national defence.<sup>23</sup> Beyond that, Spykman attributed national expansion to topography. He pointed out, for instance, that the ancient Greek city states had to become maritime powers after having settled their respective valleys because mountain ranges hampered any further expansion on land.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Spykman, *America’s Strategy*, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas J. Spykman, ‘Geography and Foreign Policy II’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1938), pp. 213–36. Robert Jervis adapted this idea in his seminal article on ‘Cooperation under the Security Dilemma’ (*World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214), suggesting that ‘if all states were self-sufficient islands, anarchy would be much less of a problem’ (p. 195).

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas J. Spykman, ‘Geography and Foreign Policy I’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1938), pp. 28–50.

## South Africa's quiet diplomacy vis-à-vis Zimbabwe

In the course of the presidential elections in 2008, Zimbabwe entered a state of violent political crisis. President Robert Mugabe and the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), led a repression campaign against the opposition party and its supporters in the run-up to the electoral process. State-sponsored violence resulted in massive human rights violations, in particular after Mugabe and ZANU PF had lost the first election round. The regional response to the crisis was minimal and considered inadequate by Western governments and non-governmental organisations. The key characteristic of South Africa's approach to the crisis in Zimbabwe was that the governments of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma did not criticise their Zimbabwean counterpart directly – unlike many Western politicians. Mbeki publicly called on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to take action in order to prevent Zimbabwe from descending into chaos when the Zimbabwean government refused to allow election monitors into the country. Other than that, South African politicians tried to mediate behind closed doors, applying maximum subtle pressure on Zimbabwe.

Political factors exist that explain South Africa's approach to Zimbabwe, which has been labelled 'quiet diplomacy'. First of all, there is considerable sympathy in South Africa for Zimbabwe's fast track land reform (that is, violent invasions of commercial farms owned by white farmers). It is seen as a role model by left-wing politicians of the African National Congress (ANC) and the recently founded Economic Freedom Fighters. Moreover, given the strong criticism by African governments that Nelson Mandela had faced for his clear stand against human rights violations in Nigeria in 1995, the Mbeki government wanted to avoid being seen as a proxy of the West. Probably for both reasons, Kgalema Motlanthe, the then secretary general of the ANC, argued that the Zimbabwean government was in trouble not because it did not care about ordinary Zimbabweans but because it cared too much. Mbeki similarly declared that the Zimbabwean crisis had arisen from a genuine concern to meet the needs of the black poor.<sup>1</sup>

Quiet diplomacy also has something to do with geographical conditions. Western states, being far away from Zimbabwe, can indulge in harsh criticism of Mugabe and his government. South Africa, conversely, is directly affected by everything that happens in Zimbabwe because of its location. In 2010 South African experts estimated that about four million Zimbabweans, out of a population of 17 million, were legally and illegally in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Many of them had fled from political violence. The less stable Zimbabwe became, the more Zimbabweans went to South Africa. Attacks against foreigners in townships – who were supposedly stealing jobs from South Africans – increased.<sup>3</sup> Some officials of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, which forms an alliance with the ANC and thus participates in the national government, called for protecting South African workers

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1 Ian Phimister and Brian Raftopoulos, 'Mugabe, Mbeki & the Politics of Anti-Imperialism', *Review of African Economy*, no. 101 (2004), pp. 385–400.

2 Scholvin, *Geopolitics of Regional Power*.

3 Karl von Holdt et al., 'The Smoke that Calls: Insurgent Citizenship, Collective Violence and the Struggle for a Place in the New South Africa', [www.csvr.org.za/docs/thesmokethatcalls.pdf](http://www.csvr.org.za/docs/thesmokethatcalls.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2015).

against foreign competition. Furthermore, regional transport by rail and road – and hence the lucrative expansion of South African companies into the SADC region – depends on Zimbabwe, which is the region’s major transit country. Plans to better interlink the regional electricity grids, easing South Africa’s electricity shortage, also rely on Zimbabwe, as all existing major transregional transmission lines pass through Zimbabwean territory. All of this would be jeopardised if South Africa pursued an approach other than quiet diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Maxi Schoeman and Chris Alden, ‘The Hegemon that Wasn’t: South Africa’s Foreign Policy towards Zimbabwe’, *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2003).

In sum, the Anglo-American branch of classical geopolitics was primarily about understanding politics based on considerations of location and physical geography and providing advice to politicians accordingly.<sup>25</sup> Halford Mackinder made this epistemology most explicit, saying that ‘geographical features govern or, at least, guide history’.<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that nature mechanically dictates the decisions made by humans. To quote Mackinder, ‘man and not nature initiates, but nature in large measure controls’.<sup>27</sup> Fettweis and many other critics unfortunately miss this crucial limitation of the explanatory force that the proponents of classical geopolitics – some more than others – ascribed to nature.

Fettweis also claims that for adherents of geopolitics ‘the earth is the most basic influence on state behavior’.<sup>28</sup> Geopolitics has, according to Fettweis, ‘always self-consciously been’ a theory of foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> Yet following Mackinder’s quote, geopolitics is not a science of foreign policy, nor state behaviour. It only deals with geographically given obstacles to, and opportunities for, successful policies. Human actors initiate policies; this behaviour is not analysed by geopolitics. Mackinder stressed in the discussion of his famous paper on *The Geographical Pivot of History* that he aimed ‘to make a geographical formula into which you could fit any political balance’:<sup>30</sup> he attributed the respective strengths and weaknesses of continental and maritime powers

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25 One might, of course, argue that there are differences between classical geopolitics in Britain, on the one hand, and in the United States, on the other. Mackinder and his disciples concentrated on physical barriers and resources that characterise Eurasia. Mahan and other adherents of classical geopolitics in the New World were much more interested in the foreign-trade orientation of major powers and sea lanes, including chokepoints, as strategic assets. These different perspectives have had an influence on European and US security policy until today. On a meta-level, classical geopolitics in Britain and the United States is, however, based on the same scientific convictions.

26 Halford J. Mackinder, ‘The Physical Basis of Political Geography’, *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1890), p. 78.

27 Halford J. Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1904), p. 422.

28 Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards’, p. 237.

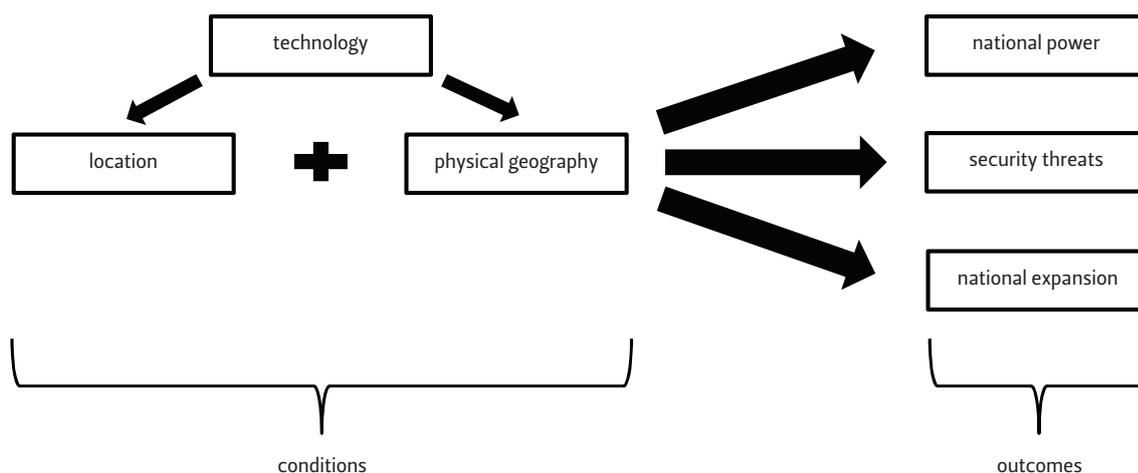
29 Fettweis, ‘Revisiting Mackinder and Angell’, pp. 119–20.

30 Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot’, p. 443.

to locational and physio-geographical conditions; he did not seek to explain everyday politics this way.

Furthermore, Fettweis summarises Mackinder by saying that ‘geographical constants [...] bless any power in control of this “heartland” [that is, the interior of the Eurasian landmass] with the most advantageous position from which to project power over [...] the entire world’.<sup>31</sup> Yet geopolitics is anything but static.<sup>32</sup> The two fundamental shifts that Mackinder described and prescribed – the beginning of the Columbian Epoch in the late 15th century and its end in his own lifetime – are due to technological innovation: innovation in navigation once made maritime transport superior to land transport, leading to the rise of maritime powers; railway lines were expected to make the presumably vast resources of the heartland accessible and thus cause the rise of continental powers.<sup>33</sup> The effect of locational and physio-geographical conditions on international relations therefore depends on technology – the ability of humankind to overcome geographical barriers and use geographical opportunities.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 1 shows the scientific principles of classical geopolitics: location and physical geography, being influenced by technology, are the conditions that explain outcomes such as national power, security threats and (directions of) national expansion. The misleading tracks of German geopolitics are omitted here.



**Figure 1: Scientific principles of classical geopolitics. Author’s own draft.**

31 Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards’, p. 234.

32 Fettweis’s own understanding of international relations is static and full of timeless truths, as exemplified by his claim that ‘there will never be a heartland (or rimland) power that threatens to take over the world’ (‘Revisiting Mackinder and Angell’, p. 119).

33 Mackinder, ‘The Geographical Pivot’.

34 Gray makes the same point in his recommendable article ‘In Defence of the Heartland’.

Yet even scholars who are favourably disposed towards (classical) geopolitics have to acknowledge that despite Mackinder's predictions the Soviet Union did not rule the world, although it ruled the heartland and Eastern Europe. The best reply to this critique is that scientists working with a sensible analytical concept will draw the wrong conclusions if they lack sophisticated empirical evidence. Mackinder expected the heartland to be marked by an abundance of natural resources. This assumption was – as we know today – wrong. Mackinder also expected transport by rail to outcompete maritime transport. Today we know that maritime transport has remained superior to transport by rail. Colin Gray summarises these objections as 'hindsight-foresight' criticism, meaning that Mackinder and others are criticised for not knowing what was not knowable at their time.<sup>35</sup>

What is more, proponents of classical geopolitics were able to modify Mackinder's theory so that it explained international relations more adequately: Spykman suggested that the rimland – that is, the wider littoral area of Eurasia – was the key to global hegemony for locational reasons.<sup>36</sup> Maritime powers, particularly the United States, had to contain their heartlandic challengers by controlling the rimland. The rimland theory shaped world politics for half a century. It arguably even shapes the foreign policy of the United States today, as the efforts to prevent China from dominating the East Asian and Southeast Asian rimland suggest. The expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to the east can also be explained through the lens of Spykman's theory: Central Europe has been bound to the West; Russia meanwhile tries to expand into the European rimland, most recently by its occupation of Crimea.

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35 Gray 'In Defence of the Heartland', p. 15.

36 Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (Hamden: Harcourt, 1944).

## GEOPOLITICS IN THE PRESENT

Geographers who carry out research on international relations have shifted towards constructivism.<sup>37</sup> Today policy advisers, most prominently Robert Kaplan, are much closer to the classical branch of geopolitics. The objective of Kaplan's book *The Revenge of Geography* is to show that geographical conditions – understood as the physical reality – matter and why. Thinking geopolitically means recognising 'the most blunt, uncomfortable, and deterministic of truths: those of geography',<sup>38</sup> as he puts it. The idea that we should concentrate on geographical conditions in order to explain the power of states and their expansion is also central to Michael Klare's abovementioned books *Resource Wars, Blood and Oil* and *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet*. Klare argues that national power in the 21st century is determined by the vastness of a country's resources and its ability to generate other sources of wealth to purchase resources, especially oil. The character and frequency of future warfare will depend on three interrelated factors: the political environment in which decisions on resource issues are taken, the demand for and supply of these resources, including possibilities to substitute them, and their spatial characteristics.

Kaplan and Klare concentrate on empirics. The geopolitical perspective that they adopt structures their analyses. Given that Kaplan and Klare write for a non-academic audience, simplification – not misinterpretation – is a necessary component of their books. Presenting Kaplan and Klare as too ignorant to realise that reality is more complex than their approaches is an unconvincing critique. If Kaplan and Klare had written their books for an academic audience, they would have certainly avoided the simplification that Fettweis criticises and gone into detail regarding independent, dependent and intervening variables. The pillars of geopolitical research presented below can be read as such a theoretical refinement of Kaplan's and Klare's work.

Since the late 1980s, three scholars have made major conceptual contributions to geopolitics: Colin Gray – a foreign policy adviser of the Reagan administration – argues that the interaction of states with constraints and opportunities that stem from geography accounts for strategic cultures, meaning patterns in foreign policy:<sup>39</sup> 'the political behavior of a country is the reflection of that country's history; and that country's history is in great part (though certainly not entirely) the product of its geographical setting'.<sup>40</sup> Leaving aside the fact that geopolitics should not aim to explain or predict state behaviour, Gray's quote implies that proponents of geopolitics do not maintain that geographical conditions dictate foreign policy. The geographical

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37 Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Putting Mackinder in his Place: Material Transformations and Myth', *Political Geography*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1992), pp. 100–118; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse'; Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 'Rethinking Geopolitics'.

38 Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, p. 28.

39 Colin S. Gray, 'Geography and Grand Strategy', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1991), pp. 311–29; Colin S. Gray, 'The Continued Primacy of Geography: A Debate on Geopolitics', *Orbis*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1996), pp. 247–59.

40 Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Super Power* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 43.

setting constitutes a stage – but not a script – that suggests the plot and influences the characters in the play.

Jakub Grygiel stresses that the objective reality that every state faces is dynamic; hence, so are geopolitical practices, which he labels geostrategies. Grygiel recognises that non-geographical factors – ideological motivations for instance – interfere with a state's foreign policy. The capacities of a state's government to understand what geographical conditions imply also vary. Grygiel explains, however, that only those geopolitical practices that are aligned with the objective reality that a state faces are rational. He explains the impact of rational and irrational geopolitical practices with regard to the rise and decline of medieval Venice. The Italian city state was able to assume a key position as an intermediary between Middle and Far Eastern suppliers of silk and spices, on the one side, and their European customers, on the other, because of favourable geographical conditions. Galleys transporting goods from Egypt and the Levant across the Mediterranean preferred to sail through the Adriatic Sea, which allowed sailors to maintain visual contact with land and thus navigate safely. The inlets and scattered islands of the Dalmatian coast provided shelter from storms and resupply stops. Venice itself had easy access to the internal markets of Italy and the transalpine transport routes. The city's main island, Rialto, is separated from the Italian mainland by shallow water, serving as a natural protection against an attack on land, while sandbars protect Venice against amphibious assaults. Venice declined because the discovery of the New World and the sea lane around Africa turned the Mediterranean into a backwater of the Atlantic Ocean with few prospects for future economic development. The Venetians could not do anything about this major geopolitical change, but they also took the misguided decision to expand into mainland Italy. This expansion proved extremely costly and united other powers against Venice.<sup>41</sup>

The third important present-day proponent of geopolitics is Saul Cohen. His research shows that geopolitics is not exclusively about international conflicts, disproving Fettweis's claim that 'where there is no [...] conflict, the tradition has little to say'.<sup>42</sup> Cohen comes from a tradition of academic geography as the study of areal differentiation. He distinguishes between the ecumene, effective territory and empty areas of a region or a state.<sup>43</sup> The ecumene comprises the centres of population and economic activity: California, Florida, the Great Lakes region, the New England states and Texas in the case of the United States. Effective territory has the potential to become part of the ecumene – because of its favourable location or resource endowment – but has not yet reached this status. Empty areas do not have the potential for significant development. They may, however, be relevant for national defence or because of resources, as exemplified by Alaska. The analysis of ecumene, effective territory and empty areas goes beyond locational and physio-geographical conditions. Cohen argues, for example, that the United States did not expand into the Caribbean in the early 19th century because

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41 Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

42 Fettweis, 'On Heartlands and Chessboards', p. 239. As a side note, strategic planning, which practically every state pursues in peacetime, proves that thinking about inter-state conflict does not depend on the existence of inter-state conflict.

43 Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided* (New York: Random House, 1963); Saul B. Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

## Iran's strategy of asymmetric maritime warfare

Looking to the sea has been an unaffordable luxury for most of Persian history, with successive waves of invaders making defence of the vast land borders far more crucial. It was not until the 1960s that Iran acquired significant maritime assets, which the Shah regime considered necessary to protect the country's vital oil exports. The 1979 revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq War did little to change the focus on defence on land, as the main threat remained Iraq. The Iranian Navy asserted maritime supremacy from the onset, aiming to damage Iraq's oil exports. In 1988 however, when the United States intervened in retaliation for Iranian mining of the Gulf, Iranian strategy changed significantly: the Iranians faced a powerful new adversary and could no longer hope to assert sea control by means of symmetric warfare. The dramatic defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War of 1990/91 reinforced this strategic change. Iran found itself in a situation unprecedented in its history because its main rivals suddenly came from the sea rather than the land. The Arab Gulf States were arrayed in the immediate vicinity, while British and US warships lurked beyond the Strait of Hormuz.

Ever since then, Iran's maritime strategy has been characterised by three geographical aspects.<sup>1</sup> First, the most defining feature of the Persian Gulf is the narrow chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz. Its strategic importance cannot be overstated. Only 54 kilometres wide, its navigable channels see an average of 15.5 million barrels of oil every day, representing one-third of seaborne oil traffic and almost one-fifth of total global production. The strait gives its controller enormous leverage over the world economy. To secure its control over the strait, Iran has built a distributed defence network that uses the many small islands to conceal stationary emplacements and small fast-attack and patrol craft.<sup>2</sup> In the event of a military confrontation between Iran, on the one side, and Israel (and the United States), on the other, Iran will most likely attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz.

Second, the narrowness of the Persian Gulf means short reaction times, and the Iranian navy can be expected to take full advantage of this in deploying an asymmetric approach, not only closing the Strait of Hormuz but also attacking aircraft carriers and tankers in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, Iran's major cities are inland; thus Iran possesses true strategic depth although the lack of littoral development also stymies the infrastructure and personnel factors crucial to naval power. When making strategic choices, Iran therefore faces many material constraints. Maximising security is achieved by investing in relatively low-cost and plentiful asymmetric warfare systems.<sup>3</sup> Even if this fairly comprehensive approach fails to completely stop enemy attacks or invasion attempts, it has the potential to extract a high cost from the attackers. Iran's gamble is to hold out long enough to turn

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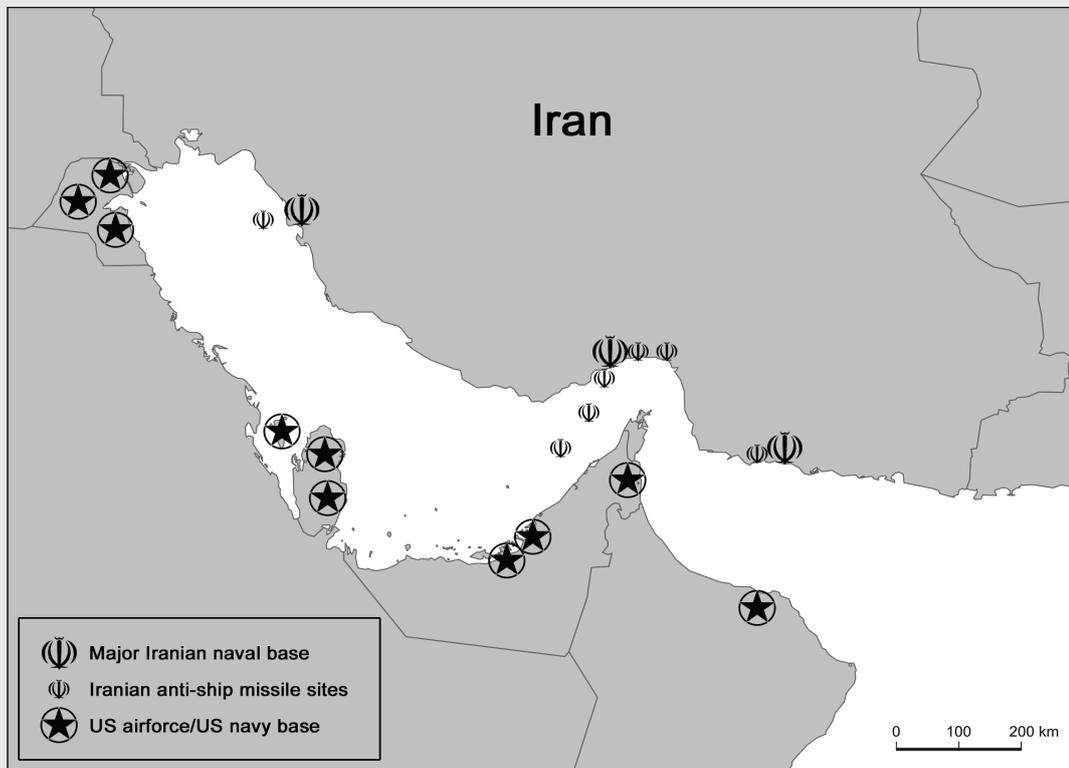
1 Sören Scholvin and Alexandr Burilkov, 'Geography and the Maritime Potential of China and Iran', *Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2013), pp. 221–35.

2 Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam C. Seitz, 'Threats, Risks and Vulnerabilities: Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare', [http://csis.org/files/publication/090522\\_gulfterrorassym.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/090522_gulfterrorassym.pdf) (accessed 10 November 2015).

3 Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. al-Rodhan, 'The Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric War', [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728\\_gulf\\_iran.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060728_gulf_iran.pdf) (accessed 10 November 2015).

such a hypothetical conflict into a war of attrition, and thus force the kind of unacceptable casualties and material costs that would lead to a political victory.

Third, Iran may have prioritised asymmetric warfare but this means that few resources are left to develop corvettes or frigates, multi-mission vessels able to handle the kind of operations that are becoming commonplace for navies across the globe. Somehow, like China, whose navy has to operate in two oceans, the Iranians would need maritime capacities for the shallow Persian Gulf and for the Indian Ocean. In other words, the geographical forces that favour asymmetric warfare in the Persian Gulf make Iran weak beyond the Strait of Hormuz. This division of theatres matters a great deal because the question of breaking out of the Persian Gulf is not merely one of prolonging reach. It also affects Iran's defence in a confrontation with any major maritime power: by ceding the Indian Ocean to others, Iran possesses no means to counter the deployment of nuclear submarines, which can be outfitted with long-range cruise missiles, and long-range aircraft there.



**Map 2: The Persian Gulf. Source: Author's own compilation.**

## The poor integration of Colombia and South America

With the establishment of the Common Market of the South (Mercado Común del Sur, Mercosur) in 1991 and Brazil's rise to regional powerhood, regional integration in South America received a major boost. Yet it appears that its limits have been reached. Steps towards deepening regional integration such as a monetary union, which was discussed in the late 1990s, have vanished from the debate. Large-scale regional infrastructure projects – the Gasoducto del Sur, for instance – have proved unrealistic. In particular, the Andean countries remain poorly connected to the Southern Cone of the continent, as demonstrated by trade: Brazil is the most important trading partner of Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay, reaching shares of up to 40 per cent in the foreign trade of these countries. The regional power only accounts for 5 to 8 per cent of the exports and imports of Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru – sometimes even less. The main trading partner of the Andean countries is the United States. China, not Brazil or any other South American country, has become increasingly important for them.

Political scientists highlight that the low levels of intra-regional trade constitute a disincentive for regional integration. The national business sectors do not push for deeper integration.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Brazil is not willing to contribute disproportionately to regional integration – it would have to provide collective goods – and its neighbouring states are unwilling to follow without ensuing compensation.<sup>2</sup> Economic asymmetries and institutional deficits also hamper deepening regionalism.<sup>3</sup> What is more, several sectors of the Brazilian economy are protected against foreign competitors. The liberal economies of the region – Chile, Colombia and Peru – focus on the Pacific Alliance as a project of regional integration, leaving aside Brazil and the Mercosur.

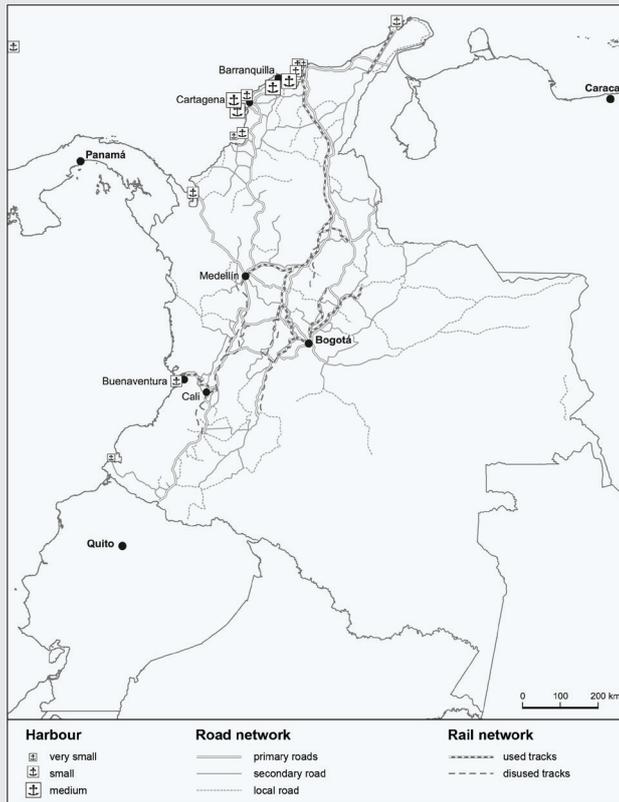
In a forthcoming publication the author of this working paper sheds light on geographical conditions that help to better understand the poor integration of Colombia and South America.<sup>4</sup> There are tremendous distances between the main urban agglomerations of Colombia and Brazil, which should, being the region's largest and most advanced economy, generate strong centripetal effects. The cities of Bogotá, Cali and Medellín are about 2,000 and 1,000 kilometres nearer to Houston and Miami respectively than to São Paulo. Colombia's ports are much closer to the largest harbours of the United States than to

1 Sean W. Burges, 'Bounded by the Reality of Trade: Practical Limits to a South American Region', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2005), pp. 437–54.

2 Andrés Malamud, 'Mercosur Turns 15: Between Rising Rhetoric and Declining Achievement', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2005), pp. 421–36; Andrés Malamud, 'A Leader Without Followers?: The Growing Divergence between the Regional and Global Performance of Brazilian Foreign Policy', *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2011), pp. 1–24.

3 Mahrukh Doctor, 'Prospects for Deepening Mercosur Integration: Economic Asymmetry and Institutional Deficits', *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2013), pp. 515–40.

4 Sören Scholvin and Benjamín Herrera Chaves, 'Separados por la Geografía: Las Relaciones de Colombia y Suramérica desde la Óptica de la Geopolítica Realista', in *Las Relaciones colombo-brasileras: Cooperación, Competición o Conflicto?*, eds. Daniel Flandes, Eduardo F. Pastrana Buelvas and Mariana Carpes (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2016).



**Map 3: Transport infrastructure in Colombia. Source: Adapted from Scholvin and Herrera Chaves 2016.**

Santos, which is the most important harbour of Brazil. Physio-geographical obstacles also separate Colombia from Brazil: the Amazon rainforest with its almost unsurmountable vegetation and the Andes, which contain passes at an elevation of up to 3,300 metres in Colombia. Colombia's domestic landscape configuration – valleys that connect the interior of the country, where about 60 per cent of the population live, to the Caribbean coast – favours an orientation to the north.

In addition to these naturally given conditions, the Amazon rainforest and the Orinoco lowlands – that is, Colombia's border regions with Brazil – are sparsely populated. As a consequence, there is a vast empty area that separates Colombia from Brazil. The economic development prospects of this area are low, as soils are poor and resources, except for oil and natural gas, are few. Major road corridors link Colombia's main cities (Bogotá, Cali and Medellín) and the Caribbean coast; transport from these three cities to the port of Buenaventura on the Pacific Ocean is troublesome but feasible. There are no road corridors from Colombia to Brazil. The town of Leticia in the very southeast of Colombia can only be reached by air.

The border posts that connect Colombia to Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela are highly congested and, in the case of Venezuela, considered unsecure. The reason for this is that Colombia's criminal gangs – namely the former paramilitary units – and guerrillas are strongest in the border regions of the country, where the central government has traditionally exerted almost no control. The presence of these armed groups apparently complicates the integration of Colombia into South America, as transport infrastructure can only be built and used under military protection. Smuggling and attacks on Venezuelan soldiers by Colombian gangs even made the Venezuelan government close all border crossings for several weeks in summer 2015.

Florida was sparsely populated and its swamps constituted a natural barrier. This changed when the peninsula benefitted from infrastructure projects, developed major urban agglomerations and attracted immigrants from Latin America. Hence, Florida has become a bridge to the Caribbean and beyond. The reason for this is a mix of locational and anthropo-geographical conditions.<sup>44</sup>

What is more, Cohen distinguishes between gateways and shatterbelts. Gateways are geopolitical units that have the potential to foster international co-operation. Eastern Europe may play such a role between maritime Europe and Russia – most importantly in terms of transport infrastructure. Shatterbelts are marked by intra-regional conflicts and the rivalry of extra-regional powers, as probably best demonstrated by the Middle East, where regional powers (Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) compete for hegemony, and external players (China, Russia and the United States) pursue conflictive strategies too.<sup>45</sup> In other words, there is a mutual impact of geography and politics – at least in Cohen’s understanding of geopolitics: a region becomes a shatterbelt because of the policies that major powers pursue. These policies may, of course, be driven by that region’s resource endowment or strategic location. Reasoning on gateways, shatterbelts and their impact on international relations leads Cohen to what he calls the ‘equilibrium [...] between opposing influences and forces’.<sup>46</sup>

This equilibrium characterises a world in which major powers co-operate on globally relevant issues such as terrorism, and regional powers assume responsibilities for the management of regionally limited security threats. As early as 2005 Cohen pointed out that the involvement of the United States in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, in particular the offensive and unilateral approach taken by the Bush administration, was destabilising. Only if major powers – China, the European Union, India and Russia – work together in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, will the region become a gateway. Cohen’s warning against offensive strategies, which provoke balancing and are thus self-defeating, exemplifies that geopolitics does not ‘tend to encourage belligerent behavior’, as Fettweis maintains.<sup>47</sup>

For what it is worth, Cohen’s reasoning on the involvement of the United States in Central Asia and Eastern Europe suggests that the rivalry of the world’s leading

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44 Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Politics*. Political scientists and scholars of strategic studies who label their research as geopolitics often disregard this extension of the independent variables or conditions that matter in geopolitical analysis, limiting themselves to the natural environment. An example of this understanding of geopolitics as a science that merely deals with natural conditions is: Mackubin T. Owens, ‘In Defense of Classical Geopolitics’, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1999), pp. 59–76.

45 Saul B. Cohen, ‘Global Geopolitical Change in the Post-Cold War Era’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 81, no. 4 (1991), pp. 551–80; Saul B. Cohen, *Geopolitics*.

46 Cohen, *Geopolitics*, p. 61.

47 Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards’, p. 247. Mackinder himself was certainly not in favour of aggressive, war-prone policies, as implied by Fettweis. Mackinder’s last major publication – ‘The Round World and the Winning of Peace’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1943), pp. 595–605 – concludes with suggestions on a path towards ‘a balanced globe of human beings. And happy, because balanced and thus free’ (p. 605).

maritime power and a major continental power – Russia – has outlasted the Cold War. Fundamental shifts in ideology appear not to matter in this rivalry. One may therefore read Gray’s prediction from the late 1980s that a basic settlement of differences between East and West is impossible as a true geopolitical statement,<sup>48</sup> instead of evidence of geopolitics failing to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union and hence concluding, as Fettweis does, that the subject is of practically no predictive value.

Figure 2 brings together the basic ideas of contemporary geopolitics. Its proponents stress the relevance of anthropo-geographical conditions and intervening variables much more clearly than their ancestors from the classical branch did.

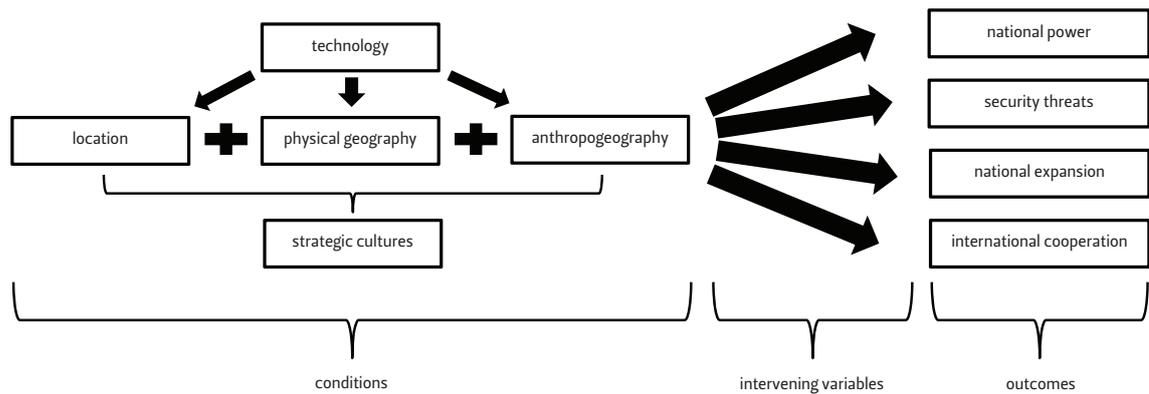


Figure 2: Scientific principles of contemporary geopolitics. Author’s own draft.

48 Gray, *Geopolitics of Super Power*.

## THREE PILLARS OF GEOPOLITICS

Bringing together classical geopolitics and contemporary geopolitics, omitting misleading tracks of the discipline and reflecting on its critique leads to three pillars for a geopolitical approach to international relations – an approach focussed on the physical reality that states face. In this sense, geographical conditions are understood as location, physical geography and man-made structures in geographical space.<sup>49</sup> The latter broadly refer to what Cohen describes as *ecumene*, *effective territory* and *empty areas*.

The first pillar of revitalised geopolitics is recognising that geographical conditions must not be seen as an irreversible fate. Kaplan's aforementioned statement on geographical conditions being deterministic truths is a buzzword for a non-academic audience. Geographical conditions are, rather, a set of obstacles and opportunities, meaning a structure that is independent of agency. Following Grygiel, sound action is grounded on considerations of geographical conditions. These conditions do not dictate what we do but they determine what is rational. Even if one does not assume that humans act rationally, examining the geographical context will still lead to sound results because geographical conditions often constitute a *sine qua non* for social processes. Understanding geographical conditions thus enables us to explain various social phenomena to a great extent.

Second, geographical conditions are the fundament of suitable explanations for general patterns and long-term processes. They are of much less use when it comes to case-specific particularities and short-term developments. This principle is best exemplified by what Spykman wrote about coming and going ministers, on the one hand, and unperturbed mountain ranges, on the other: coming and going ministers cause minor, short-term fluctuations within patterns determined at large by mountain ranges. Cohen goes a step further, arguing that 'geopolitical analysis does not predict the timing of events [...] that force radical change in the geopolitical map'. It concentrates on 'conditions that are likely to bring about geopolitical change'.<sup>50</sup> Hence, Fettweis's argument that 'few research programs have failed to anticipate events as spectacularly as geopolitics' is pointless.<sup>51</sup> Geopolitics is not about predicting events.

Third, in order to show that geographical conditions matter and in what way, it is helpful to trace processes and to establish causal mechanisms, concentrating on the role of geographical conditions therein. Non-geographical intervening factors have to be recognised. Technology appears to be the most important intervening factor. Spykman pointed out that large rivers usually form a considerable barrier to the expansion of states. Yet advancements in navigation can turn a river into a means of transportation that prescribes the direction of national expansion.<sup>52</sup> From this perspective it is not surprising that the most formidable geopolitical concept – Mackinder's heartland theory – attributes dynamics in international relations to technological advancement: as noted,

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49 Scholvin, *Geopolitics of Regional Power*.

50 Cohen, *Geopolitics*, p. 1.

51 Fettweis, 'On Heartlands and Chessboards', p. 241.

52 Spykman, 'Geography and Foreign Policy I'.

the construction of ships that crossed the oceans led to the rise of maritime powers in the Columbian Epoch; transport by rail was expected to account for the rise of continental powers in the Post-Columbian Epoch.

Another major intervening factor is politics. The resource-driven conflicts that Klare predicts are not only influenced by the capacity of resource-scare countries to substitute the resources they lack, meaning by technological progress. The scramble for resources, including the probability of violent conflicts over resources, also depends on the political environment in which decisions on resources are taken. This becomes apparent in the energy policy of the United States. At the beginning of this century the United States became involved in the quest for oil resources in Sub-Saharan Africa, trying to reduce its dependence on the politically unreliable Middle Eastern oil exporters, in particular Saudi Arabia, home to 15 of the 19 terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks. Due to the fracking boom in North America, which is based on purely geographical conditions, this policy has recently been revised.<sup>53</sup> Fettweis argues that ‘in 2015, geography is largely scenery, all but irrelevant to the most important issues of grand strategy’.<sup>54</sup> It appears that the opposite is true.

Based on these pillars geopolitical case studies should aim to answer three questions:<sup>55</sup>

- Do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome?
- If yes, do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome significantly?
- If yes, how, meaning in combination with which other factors do geographical conditions influence the observed outcome?

Carrying out this research agenda will enable us to provide geopolitical insights into phenomena that interest international relations scholars. It also means testing the relevance of geographical conditions and recognising that they do not cause anything on their own but only do so in interaction with non-geographical factors. Using Gray’s words, ‘sound geopolitics is neither geographically deterministic, nor is it wedded to the absurd notion that particular features of physical geography have an inherent, unchanging significance. Geopolitics does insist, though, that spatial factors [...] be accorded their due’.<sup>56</sup>

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53 Stefan Andreasson, ‘British and US Strategies in the Competition for Energy Resources in Sub-Saharan Africa’, in *A New Scramble for Africa: The Rush for Energy Resources in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Sören Scholvin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 13–31.

54 Fettweis, ‘On Heartlands and Chessboards’, p. 247.

55 Scholvin, *Geopolitics of Regional Power*.

56 Gray ‘In Defence of the Heartland’, p. 22.