



# RETHINKING GEOPOLITICS: GEOGRAPHY AS AN AID TO STATECRAFT

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Geopolitics has become marginalized in modern international relations scholarship despite its foundational role. This essay seeks to bring geopolitics back to the mainstream of international relations through conceptual, historical, and theoretical analyses. I make three arguments. First, definitional confusion about geopolitics comes from an overly broad understanding of geography. Notwithstanding various uses, however, geography itself should be re-centered as the analytical core of geopolitics. Second, classical geopolitics sought to inform grand strategy using geography as an explanatory variable and was thus institutionalized in U.S. strategic education. To wit, geography was used as "an aid to statecraft." Finally, although largely ignored in mainstream international relations, the basic premise of geopolitics still undergirds much of its research. But the asymmetry, relativity, and comprehensiveness of geography have not been well explored. Drawing from classical geopolitical works, I offer some suggestions for future research on how to use geography in international relations scholarship.

**G**eopolitics has become an increasingly trendy subject over the past decade. A number of popular books on the subject have been published;<sup>1</sup> savvy investors and businessmen are looking for "geopolitical" consultants;<sup>2</sup> and research centers and programs committed to "geopolitical" analysis are emerging.<sup>3</sup> However, the precise definition of "geopolitics" remains vague. One observer lamented some time ago that geopolitics means "everything from geographic determinism ... to merely an analytical way of thinking."<sup>4</sup> This criticism remains valid today. Academic works embracing the term "geopolitics" offer ingen-

ious, yet somewhat deflective, interpretations, from realism to post-modernism. While this definitional plasticity likely contributed to the widespread use of the term, such a sweeping conceptualization makes productive discussions of the topic difficult.<sup>5</sup>

Since the term "geopolitics" is often used almost synonymously with "international affairs," and given the topic's recent prominence, one would surmise that international relations scholars are familiar with the subject — especially since the "classical geopolitics" of the late 19th century effectively "inaugurated" modern international relations scholarship, according to one prominent scholar.<sup>6</sup> But this is not the case.

1 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); Peter Zeihan, *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Twelve, 2014); and Tim Marshall, *The Power of Geography: Ten Maps that Reveal the Future of Our World* (New York: Scribner, 2021).

2 Miriam Rozen, "Appetite for Geopolitical Risk Management Is Growing," *Financial Times*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/3989290b-c4d1-48dc-88f1-ca80e61c186f>.

3 In recent years, various think tanks (e.g., Stimson's Geopolitics and Economic Statecraft Project) and universities (Belfer Center's Geopolitics of Energy Project) in the United States have launched research initiatives with "geopolitics" in their name. Outside the United States, the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge (United Kingdom), the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies (South Korea), the Council on Geostrategy (United Kingdom), and the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics (Belgium) and the Spykman Center (France) were founded in 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2022, respectively. Also, see various essays featured in the "Mapping China's Strategic Space" website, launched by the National Bureau of Asian Research, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org>.

4 Mackubin Thomas Owens, "In Defense of Classical Geopolitics," *Naval War College Review* 52, no. 4 (1999): 62, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44643038>.

5 John Gerring, "What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences," *Polity* 31, no. 3 (1999): 357–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3235246>.

6 William R. Thompson, "Dehio, Long Cycles, and the Geohistorical Context of Structural Transition," *World Politics* 45, no. 1 (1992): 127 (fn 1), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010521>.



As intellectual historian Lucian Ashworth observed, geopolitics is “largely ignored” in the field.<sup>7</sup> The discussion of early geopolitical writing is confined to a small group of defense experts, geographers, and historians.<sup>8</sup> Yet, their fixation with specific concepts, such as the “heartland” and the “rimland,” discouraged engagement with the field.<sup>9</sup> This is unfortunate, because classical geopolitics has much to offer. Understanding classical geopolitics and its relationship with international relations will help scholars to be more conscious of their own disciplinary history, to examine geographical assumptions underlying their scholarship, and ultimately to better incorporate geographic features into their research. This last point is especially important, since policymakers and strategists in Washington are debating where to draw defensive parameters against strategic competitors. Their answers, by and large, will depend on the value they assign to different geographic locations.<sup>10</sup>

This essay, therefore, seeks to re-establish the lost connection between geopolitics and international relations. It proceeds in three parts. The first order of business is to clarify the definition of “geopolitics,” given the habitual conceptual over-stretching of the term. After examining various uses of geopolitics in contemporary discourses, the first section will show that commentators generally equate it with international affairs in general or power politics in particular. This is understandable given the fundamentally territorial nature of states and their interactions

— especially competition over geographic objects. In contrast, scholars tend to have more focused definitions of the term, but these are no less confusing. This section shows that this definitional confusion in scholarly works comes from different conceptualizations of the term’s analytical core, geography.

Even if we adopt a literal definition of geography, however, a question remains on the relationship between “geo” and “politics.” Thus, the second section briefly examines the history of geopolitics. Since the general story is well told elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> it will focus on two particular aspects of the history of geopolitics. The first is the ideas of three key thinkers in what is often called the Anglo-American “geostrategic” school — Halford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan, and Nicholas Spykman — both their substance and context.<sup>12</sup> This will not only clarify distinctions between geopolitics and political geography, conceptually if not substantively, but also show why classical geopolitics was essentially a precursor to modern international relations. In turn, the second aspect is the historical relationship between the two. While recent scholarship has started re-establishing the connection between geopolitics and international relations, how exactly the former influenced the latter remains somewhat unclear.<sup>13</sup> By tracing the institutionalization of geopolitics in U.S. strategic education, we can gain a better understanding of how it actually contributed to the birth of international relations.

7 Lucian M. Ashworth, “Realism and the Spirit of 1919: Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Reality of the League of Nations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (2011): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110363501>. Exceptions are Harvey Starr, *On Geopolitics: Space, Place, and International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013); Phil Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics: A New Analytical Model* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); and Andrew Rhodes, “Thinking in Space: The Role of Geography in National Security Decision-Making,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 4 (2019): 90–108, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/6664>.

8 Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jeremy Black, *Geopolitics and the Quest for Dominance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Colin S. Gray, “Nicholas John Spykman, the Balance of Power, and International Order,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (2015): 873–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1018412>; Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Zhengyu Wu, “Classical Geopolitics, Realism and the Balance of Power Theory,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 6 (2018): 786–823, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1379398>; Antero Holmila, “Re-thinking Nicholas J. Spykman: From Historical Sociology to Balance of Power,” *International History Review* 42, no. 5 (2020): 951–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1655469>; and Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021).

9 For instance, Geoffrey Sloan, “Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437752>.

10 For diverging assessments and prescriptions, see Jakob J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Evan R. Sankey, “Reconsidering Spheres of Influence,” *Survival* 62, no. 2 (2020): 37–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1739947>; and Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

11 For instance, Ladis K.D. Kristof, “The Origins and Evolution of Geopolitics,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 1 (1960): 15–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200276000400103>; Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present and Future* (London: Pinter, 1997); and Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson, eds., *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000).

12 Owens, “In Defense of Classical Geopolitics.” It should be noted at the outset that the term “geopolitics” is not synonymous with the German *Geopolitik*. The latter is one form of the former. Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy, I,” *American Political Science Review* 32, no. 1 (1938): 30 (fn 3), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1949029>. See also, Owens, “Classical Geopolitics,” 65–66; Herman Van der Wusten and Gertjan Dijkink, “German, British and French Geopolitics: The Enduring Differences,” *Geopolitics* 7, no. 3 (2002): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000970>; Michael Lind, “A Neglected American Tradition of Geopolitics?” *Geopolitics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 181–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040701783441>; and Wu, “Classical Geopolitics.”

13 For instance, David Crikemans describes geopolitics as having gone “underground,” without substantiating his claim. David Crikemans, “Geopolitical Schools of Thought: A Concise Overview from 1890 till 2020, and Beyond,” in *Geopolitics and International Relations: Grounding World Politics Anew*, ed. David Crikemans (Boston: Brill, 2021), 119–20. See also, Lucian M. Ashworth, “Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2013): 138–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12060>; and Matthew Specter, *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought Between Germany and the United States* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).



Not only did geopolitics help form the bedrock of modern international relations, but its intellectual premise — that geography affects state behavior — although under-appreciated, still undergirds much of contemporary research. Thus, the third and final section will illustrate this point by surveying geopolitical propositions in international relations scholarship, broadly defined. It will examine how leading works on foreign policy and grand strategy have used geography as a key explanatory variable. The list presented there is by no means exhaustive. Rather, the purpose is to identify the broad tendencies in the field. As will be shown, the use of geography as an explanatory variable in these works falls under one of the three pillars of strategy: the ends, means, and ways.<sup>14</sup> Despite modern scholarship's contribution, this essay finds that these works have fallen short of capturing the asymmetry, relativity, and comprehensiveness of geography. A more serious engagement with classical geopolitics, especially with how the three founding figures of the field conceptualized geography, would help scholars improve on these points. The paper closes with a brief remark on future research.

Together, these findings form three arguments about the concept, history, and theory of geopolitics. First, the meaning of the term “geography” itself should be reclaimed as the analytical core of geopolitics, as a *concept*, to avoid definitional confusion and to develop a constructive research program. Second, *historically*, geopolitics was conceived of as a group of grand strategic theories, akin to contemporary international relations scholarship, with geography serving as a key explanatory variable — in other words, geography was used as “an aid to statecraft.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, international relations scholars can benefit from engaging classical geopolitics, especially its *theoretical* components, by paying attention to how geography interacts with human factors, such as technology and institutions, to dynamically shape the strategic environment, as opposed to fixating on particular geographies or geopolitical maxims.

The broad scope of this essay by default makes it interpretative and synthesizing in its approach. However, it relies on diverse sources, from published monographs to heretofore neglected unpublished works and recently released documents. It also draws from various disciplines across time, from the writings of classical geopoliticians of the late 19th century to contemporary scholarship in social sciences and intellectual history. Its purpose is less about breaking new theoretical or empirical ground than about bringing together compartmentalized knowledge in a holistic manner, thereby bridging the gap between the disconnected fields of geopolitics and international relations.

## Geopolitics as a Concept

The term “geopolitics” has been rather loosely defined and used somewhat haphazardly. Commentators often use “geopolitics” as a substitute for international affairs in general. A corollary is that anything involving political and strategic rationale is deemed “geopolitical.”<sup>16</sup> As Colin Gray argued, “all politics is geopolitics.”<sup>17</sup> Although such an expansive definition of geopolitics omits “geo” altogether, it is not entirely wrong. Because states — the main actors in the international arena — are territorial entities by nature, their political relations are inherently geopolitical.<sup>18</sup> But this excessively broad definition is unhelpful for analytical purposes. If everything is geopolitical, nothing really is. One intuitively knows that it would be absurd to describe a congenial meeting of heads of state discussing mundane issues as “geopolitical,” even though it involves interstate exchanges.

A related, yet more focused, definition of geopolitics is great-power competition.<sup>19</sup> This is arguably the most common use of the term. Its progenitor, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, used “geopolitics” to denote “an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium,” understood as the balance of power.<sup>20</sup> He popularized this conception during the 1970s, when the term itself had largely

14 The “ends, ways, and means” model was first suggested in Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., “Defining Military Strategy,” *Military Review* 69, no. 5 (1989): 3–8, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/MR-75th-Anniversary/75th-Lykke/>. See also, Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a critique of this model, see Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (2016): 81–91, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3000>.

15 This expression is from Frederick J. Teggart, “Geography as an Aid to Statecraft: An Appreciation of Mackinder's ‘Democratic Ideals and Reality,’” *Geographical Review* 8, no. 4/5 (1919): 227–42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/207838>.

16 Jacky Wong, “Samsung Orders U.S. Chips, with a Side of Geopolitics,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 23, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/samsung-orders-u-s-chips-with-a-side-of-geopolitics-11637666262>.

17 Colin S. Gray, “Inescapable Geography,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437759>.

18 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 2: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56.

19 Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 69–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483407>.

20 Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 914.



been forgotten in the United States.<sup>21</sup> There is some truth to this way of conceptualizing geopolitics because great-power competition is often a competition over territory, resources, or other geographic objects. Kissinger himself is generally attentive to the importance of location throughout his works.<sup>22</sup> Still, Kissinger as a theorist, much like his contemporary Hans Morgenthau, was an ontological “idealist” concerned with moral — not material — forces, and his equation of geopolitics with high politics led later generations of commentators to omit “geo” from their analyses.<sup>23</sup>

**Conceptually, however, realism and geopolitics are different: The former is defined as a philosophical position that assumes the primacy of power and security in the struggle among self-interested political groups, whereas the latter does not necessarily have to make these assumptions and focuses instead on spatial dimensions.**

If pundits have neglected the prefix, academics have either creatively overstretched the definition of “geopolitics” or reversed the order of “geo” and “politics.” Broadly speaking, in academia “geopolitics” means either “politics of geography” or “geography of politics.”<sup>24</sup> The former is used in the “critical geopolitics” literature where assumptions underlying cartographic concepts and discourses are examined.<sup>25</sup> While offering fresh perspectives, critical geopolitics

has effectively gotten rid of the “geo” part — i.e., physical geography — and thus is more appropriately called the etymology or sociology of cartography.<sup>26</sup>

The latter approach, “geography of politics,” is more common. It is uncontroversial to state that geography constitutes the basic context, or milieu, of politics. But even those who take the “geo” component more seriously conceptualize geography differently. To Robert Kaplan, for instance, geography is synonymous with the *realities* of international politics, and geopolitics with political realism. As Kaplan wrote, “realism is about the recognition of the most blunt, uncomfortable, and deterministic truths: those of geography.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, classical geopolitical thinkers, such as Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman, regarded international conflicts largely as a reality to reckon with, and earlier realists did take geography seriously.<sup>28</sup> One could also blame Mackinder for Kaplan’s conceptual overstretch, because he essentially contrasted geographic *reality* with democratic *ideals*.<sup>29</sup>

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21 Geoffrey Sloan and Colin S. Gray, “Why Geopolitics?” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437751>.

22 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 58; and Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). See also, Leslie W. Hepple, “The Revival of Geopolitics,” *Political Geography Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1986): 26, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827\(86\)90055-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827(86)90055-8).

23 Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger*, vol. 1, 1923–1968: *The Idealist* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

24 Jeremy Black, “Towards a Marxist Geopolitics,” *Geopolitics* 16, no. 1 (2011): 234–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2010.493997>.

25 Gearóid Ó. Tuathail, “Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 107–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437756>.

26 Highly critical assessments are offered in Terrence W. Haverluk, Kevin M. Beauchemin, and Brandon A. Mueller, “The Three Critical Flaws of Critical Geopolitics: Towards a Neo-Classical Geopolitics,” *Geopolitics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2013.803192>; and Black, *Geopolitics*, 229–39. For a more positive assessment, see Phil Kelly, “A Critique of Critical Geopolitics,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 1 (2006): 24–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500524053>.

27 Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, 27–28. In fairness, Kaplan includes historical geography and geographically conscious historical studies in his analysis.

28 Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 8–11.

29 Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1919). Scholarly works treating geopolitics essentially as a variant of realism include: Wu, “Classical Geopolitics”; Van Jackson, “Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics,” *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 3 (2020): 255–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.21>; and Specter, *Atlantic Realists*.

30 Robert G. Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 287–304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300026710>.

In contrast, for geopolitics, balance-of-power relationships come, in part, in terms of spatial positions or patterns.”<sup>31</sup> More intuitively, as Or Rosenboim analogized, if realism weighs the balance on a mental “scale,” geopolitics expresses it spatially on a map.<sup>32</sup> In short, realism and geopolitics are two different schools of thought, albeit with some areas of overlap.

Another related conceptual cousin is historical materialism. Daniel Deudney defined “geopolitics” as a “historical security materialist theory,” equating geography with the material environment. Specifically, he argued that geopolitics explains the creation of the world order in terms of “violence interdependence,” which is determined by geography and technology.<sup>33</sup> Geography does constitute the basic feature of the material world. At one level, geopolitics and materialism seem similar. Not surprisingly, E. H. Carr mentioned *Geopolitik*, albeit in passing, alongside other prominent historical materialists such as Georg Hegel and Karl Marx.<sup>34</sup> In fact, communists were some of its earliest critics, because, according to them, the German “portmanteau science” essentially “stole” Marx’s materialism. As one scholar wrote, “For the economic materialism ... the Geopolitikers had merely substituted the geographic materialism ... . What the class struggle is to the Marxist the struggle for space is to the Geopolitiker.”<sup>35</sup>

On a closer examination, however, their difference is stark. While historical materialism, as manifested in classical Marxism, generally takes the “inside-out” approach, privileging domestic factors,<sup>36</sup> geopolitics focuses primarily on international issues. Relatedly,

Marxism presupposes the primacy of economics, or the “mode of production,” as opposed to geopolitics which does not make this assumption. Also, Deudney’s specific claim that geopolitics is a form of historical *security* materialism should be qualified. Classical geopoliticians did not periodize history according to the development of destructive capabilities. Mackinder’s “Columbian Epoch” and Mahan’s periodization had little, if anything, to do with weapons technology.<sup>37</sup> Finally, geopoliticians do not share historical materialists’ determinism. They treat geography as a condition, albeit a major one, under which states operate. A wise statesperson can exploit geography to his or her advantage.<sup>38</sup> Thus, geopolitics and historical materialism are profoundly different, despite some similarities.<sup>39</sup>

In short, geography itself, not its abstractions, should be returned as the conceptual core of geopolitics. This leads us back to a more traditional definition. Geographer Saul Cohen defined geopolitics as “the relation of international political power to the geographical setting.”<sup>40</sup> While a useful definition, a question remains. How is geopolitics different from political geography? Is the distinction, as Franklin Roosevelt’s geographer Isaiah Bowman argued, one of purpose, where geopolitics is a pseudo-science that advances a particular agenda and political geography is a legitimate science that advances human knowledge?<sup>41</sup> In contrast, political scientist Harold Sprout considered political geography as a subset of geopolitics, containing the latter’s best insights.<sup>42</sup> Still others believed that the difference is one of

31 Black, *Geopolitics*, 9; and Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics*, 2–3, 29–30.

32 Or Rosenboim, “The Value of Space: Geopolitics, Geography and the American Search for International Theory in the 1950s,” *International History Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 373, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1596966>.

33 The term is from Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). On his view on geopolitics in general, see Daniel Deudney, “Geopolitics as Theory: Historical Security Materialism,” *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2000): 77–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066100006001004>.

34 E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, reprint of 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 66. For distinctions between geopolitics and *Geopolitik*, see footnote 12.

35 Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1942), 137–38.

36 On this assessment, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, with a New Prologue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), xix–xxi. The term “inside-out” is from Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (1978): 881–912, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003201X>.

37 Mackinder’s was about the geographic scope determined by the dominant mode of transportation. In contrast, Mahan’s book stops in 1783 because he needed a break at the time of his writing. Halford J. Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904): 421–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>; and McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations*, 14.

38 Walter A. McDougall, “Why Geography Matters ... But Is So Little Learned,” *Orbis* 47, no. 2 (2003): 224–25, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387\(03\)00006-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0030-4387(03)00006-1).

39 Mahan parted with the “material” school and had become an adherent of the historical approach by the time he wrote his first book. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations*, 55–57.

40 Quoted in Owens, “Classical Geopolitics,” 60.

41 Isaiah Bowman, “Geography vs. Geopolitics,” *Geographical Review* 32, no. 4 (1942): 646–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/210002>.

42 Daniel H. Deudney, “Geopolitics and Change,” in *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, ed. Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 97, 120 (fn 4).



methodology and ontology.<sup>43</sup> Although unclear at the outset, they have different intellectual points of focus. Urban planning, for instance, is considered in political geography, but not necessarily in geopolitical analysis. To illustrate this point, some intellectual archaeology is in order.

## **The Rise and Fall of Geopolitics: A Short History**

### **Background of Geopolitics**

Historians and philosophers sought to explain human affairs with geographic referents long before the terms “political geography” and “geopolitics” entered the lexicon. Thucydides’ history, for instance, begins with “political archaeology,” describing how geography affected the domestic structure of Athens.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Montesquieu argued that the physical environment of the land affected not only its inhabitants’ physiology but also their political system.<sup>45</sup> These early “physio-politicians,” who examined the interaction between humans and nature, were generally more interested in how the natural environment affected political organizations.<sup>46</sup> During the Age of Discovery, geography served *raison d’état* by providing knowledge that was necessary to explore and, as new places and things were discovered, begat scientific disciplines.<sup>47</sup>

With the industrial revolution, the focus of physio-politicians shifted from domestic to international politics, influenced by technological developments that were shrinking the globe. Meanwhile, geogra-

phy became an established discipline.<sup>48</sup> This gave birth to political geography and geopolitics, both the terms and the substance of each. In the mid-18th century, French philosopher Anne Robert Jacques Turgot used “political geography” to refer to “the relationship between the facts of geography ... and the organization of politics.”<sup>49</sup> About a century and a half later in 1899, Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen coined the term *Geopolitik*, which denotes “the harnessing of geographical knowledge to further the aims of specific nation states.”<sup>50</sup> Kjellen, who had been influenced by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, saw the state as a living organism. This line of thinking, often called the “organic state theory,” would in turn become prominent in Germany after World War I.<sup>51</sup>

### **Founding Figures: Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman**

Unlike in continental Europe, geopoliticians in the Anglophone world had a different set of concerns and analytical points of focus.<sup>52</sup> Three key theorists in the “geostrategic” school are Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman. In *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Mahan argued that sea powers,<sup>53</sup> defined as those that exert control over key waterways, played a decisive role in the military history of Europe, which he saw as marked by clashes of interests among nations. Because waterborne shipping is cheaper and easier than overland transportation, maritime powers have an advantage over land powers in trade and commerce. In addition, the strength of continental

43 This is political scientist George A. Lipsky’s view, cited in “Fifth Meeting: Political Geography vs. Geopolitics, April 8, 1954,” in *American Power and International Theory at the Council on Foreign Relations, 1953–54*, ed. David M. McCourt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 169–73.

44 Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996).

45 For a summary of Montesquieu’s view, see Karl Marcus Kriesel, “Montesquieu: Possibilistic Political Geographer,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58, no. 3 (1968): 557–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1968.tb01652.x>.

46 Deudney, *Bounding Power*, 17–18.

47 McDougall, “Why Geography Matters,” 220.

48 W.H. Parker, *Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1982), 57–58; Deudney, “Geopolitics as Theory,” 81–84; and Lucian M. Ashworth, *A History of International Thought: From the Origins of the Modern State to Academic International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1–92.

49 John A. Agnew and Luca Muscarà, *Making Political Geography*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 59–60.

50 Agnew and Muscarà, *Making Political Geography*, 21–22. See also, Owens, “In Defense of Classical Geopolitics,” 65.

51 David T. Murphy, *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918–1933* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990); Holger H. Herwig, “Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 218–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437762>; Ola Tunander, “Swedish-German Geopolitics for a New Century: Rudolf Kjellen’s ‘The State as a Living Organism,’” *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 451–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021050100451X>; Friedrich Ratzel, “Lebensraum: A Biogeographical Study” (1901; translated into English by Tul’si [Tuesday] Bhambry), *Journal of Historical Geography* 61 (2018): 59–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2018.03.001>.

52 Historian Jonathan Haslam noted that the concern of *fin de siècle* German intellectuals was to harness nationalism after long years of division and impoverishment following the Thirty Years’ War, unlike in France and Britain where the “contractual” notion of the state had become established, hinting at the source of different intellectual orientations in Britain and the United States. Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 167–69, and footnote 12.

53 The original term was “seapower,” deriving from the Greek term *thalassokratia*. Mahan split this term and, in doing so, narrowed the meaning to denote naval power. This article will use Mahan’s term (“sea power”) interchangeably with “maritime power.” Andrew D. Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 2–4.



states is sapped by the requirements of territorial defense. Thus, sea powers have had an overbearing influence on strategic questions throughout history. This “essential” principle of statecraft was still applicable at the strategic level, Mahan argued, regardless of technological changes that might affect tactics.<sup>54</sup>

According to Mahan, sea power has three components: commerce, shipping, and colonies. While maritime trade is dependent on commercial shipping, the wealth generated should be protected by a capable navy. Also, the government should secure overseas stations and markets — what Mahan referred to as “colonies” — to fuel and maintain commercial and naval vessels, and to sell industrial products. Mahan argued that whether a country could become a sea power depended on six elements: “geographical position” (insular vs. continental), “physical conformation” (access to the sea and harbors), “extent of territory” (populated coastlines), “number of population” (seaworthy population), “national character” (commercial aptitude), and “character of the government” (regime type and policy). The first three are “natural conditions,” whereas the latter three pertain to human conditions. Their successful combination is subject to human agency, as illustrated in Mahan’s lengthy discussion on how Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s naval policy affected French sea power.<sup>55</sup>

Writing at a time when the U.S. Navy was smaller than that of most European great powers, Mahan’s

initial concern was with the near seas, especially the Caribbean.<sup>56</sup> However, he certainly believed that the Pacific Ocean would become a strategic focus in the future. For instance, Mahan noted that the Pacific frontier is the weakest, although at the time it was “far removed from the most dangerous possible enemies.”<sup>57</sup> Having in mind the likely construction of an isthmian canal connecting the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, Mahan wrote: “The military needs of the Pacific States, as well as their supreme importance to the whole country, are ... so near that provision should immediately begin.”<sup>58</sup> After the annexation of the Philippines following the Spanish-American War, Mahan thought that the most pressing problem was the fate of the Chinese empire, which was increasingly threatened by the land power of Russia. To protect America’s interests there, Mahan recommended the construction of a powerful navy and an isthmus canal in either Nicaragua or Panama, a quasi-alliance with other maritime powers that shared common interests — Britain, Germany, and Japan — and, finally, retrenchment from the area south of the Amazon valley to focus on the Caribbean and the “problem of Asia.”<sup>59</sup>

If Mahan believed that America’s future lay in the world’s oceans, Mackinder thought that the era of Europe’s maritime dominance — the “Columbian Epoch” — might be over due to technological changes and geographic discovery.<sup>60</sup> In his lecture delivered at the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, Mackinder observed that the wealth and power of nations historically depended as much on natural resources and mobility, which were in turn determined primarily by topography, terrain, and animal power, as it did on national characteristics, such as socio-economic organizations. For Mackinder, that there was no more new territory to occupy meant the “closure” of the international political system, which would intensify competition among states. With the development of transportation and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway,

The most fundamental geographic fact of Europe, Mackinder argued, lay in the divide between Western and Eastern Europe with Germany positioned at the center.

54 Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (London: S. Low, Marston, 1890), 1, 14.

55 Mahan, *Sea Power*, 29, 70–74. Jon Sumida wrote that this chapter was added in a rather ad hoc manner and does not represent Mahan’s view in full. For the purpose of our discussion, however, the present work draws from this section. Jon Sumida, “Alfred Thayer Mahan, Geopolitician,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 46–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437753>.

56 Philip A. Crowl, “Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 463–65.

57 Mahan, *Sea Power*, 42.

58 Alfred T. Mahan, “The United States Looking Outward,” *Atlantic Monthly* 66, no. 398 (1890): 823, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1890/12/the-united-states-looking-outward/306348/>.

59 Alfred T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect Upon International Policies* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1900).

60 This expression is from Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot,” 421. His basic geopolitical outlook, expressed in his “pivot” lecture and the 1919 treatise, were laid out earlier in a series of lectures at the Institute of Bankers in 1899. Halford J. Mackinder, “The Great Trade Routes: Their Connection with the Organization of Industry, Commerce, and Finance,” Lectures 1–4, *Journal of the Institute of Bankers XXI* (1900): 1–6, 137–46, 147–55, 266–73, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015031657045>.





Mackinder speculated that the “pivot” state, Russia, would now pose a threat to Britain that was analogous to the Mongol threat to Europe several centuries prior. Because Russia’s large swath of land is inaccessible from the sea, it could tap continental resources with which to build an unmatched navy. The post-Columbian period, therefore, would see a return to the *status quo ante* with the “pivot” of Eurasia once again overshadowing world affairs.<sup>61</sup>

While he did not make any specific recommendations then, Mackinder developed his geopolitical outlook further for a post-World War I world in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. The most fundamental geographic fact of Europe, Mackinder argued, lay in the divide between Western and Eastern Europe with Germany positioned at the center. Eastern Europe could be used as a springboard for the “Heartland,” a wider region outside Europe extending from Siberia to Persia. While a maritime power’s fleet could not penetrate into the “Heartland,” a continental power could launch a navy from it, thereby potentially dominating the entire “World Island,” a joint continent of Europe, Africa, and Asia.<sup>62</sup> In his view, World War I was essentially an attempt by Germany, organized by the “Going Concern” — the statist political-economic organizations — to subdue the Slavic people who would “grow food for her and ... buy her wares” for “the occupation of the Heartland.”<sup>63</sup> In a Thucydidean sense, Mackinder argued that great-power war was caused fundamentally by the “unequal growth” of nations, which resulted largely from different resource endowments and strategic opportunities.<sup>64</sup> To construct a durable peace, the fundamental reality of political and economic geography should be factored in. A zone of viable buffer states, Mackinder advised, should be established in Eastern Europe to separate Germany from Russia.<sup>65</sup>

Mackinder’s outlook was not static, however. He was agnostic about which nation would occupy the “pivot” or the “heartland,” thereby commanding Eurasia.

Mackinder’s nightmare as described in his “pivot” lecture was a Russo-German alliance. That talk closed with an interesting speculation about the possibility of Chinese domination of Russia under Japan’s tutelage, which would be equally menacing.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, Mackinder distinguished the purely geographic from the strategic heartland. Because land powers could close the Black Sea and the Baltic with the development of transportation and weapons, the strategic heartland should include their basins.<sup>67</sup> His last work, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1943, equated the heartland with the area occupied by Moscow excluding “Lenaland,” the surrounding area of “the transcontinental railroad from Irkutsk to Vladivostok.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, his infamous aphorism evoking the Elizabethan statesman Walter Raleigh — “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.” — should be seen as a rhetorical devise, not a deterministic vision.<sup>69</sup>

Eschewing grand theorizing about the fate of nations, Spykman focused his attention more narrowly on strategic problems at a time when international relations in the United States was predominantly idealistic. Spykman laid out his geopolitical outlook in a series of articles written in the interwar years and in his magnum opus, *America’s Strategy in World Politics*. Presaging modern structural realists, Spykman argued that the absence of “governmental organization ... preserving order and enforcing law” necessitates the formulation of geographically informed foreign policy. This was because “[g]eography is the most fundamental factor ... it is the most permanent. Ministers come and ministers go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed.”<sup>70</sup> A nation’s size and location are two of the most important factors informing its foreign policy. The former approximates “potential strength” — a large territory gives a country advantages in defense and national power only if it is well endowed and

61 Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot.”

62 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 79 (“world island”), 93 (“heartland”).

63 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 177.

64 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 4.

65 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 191.

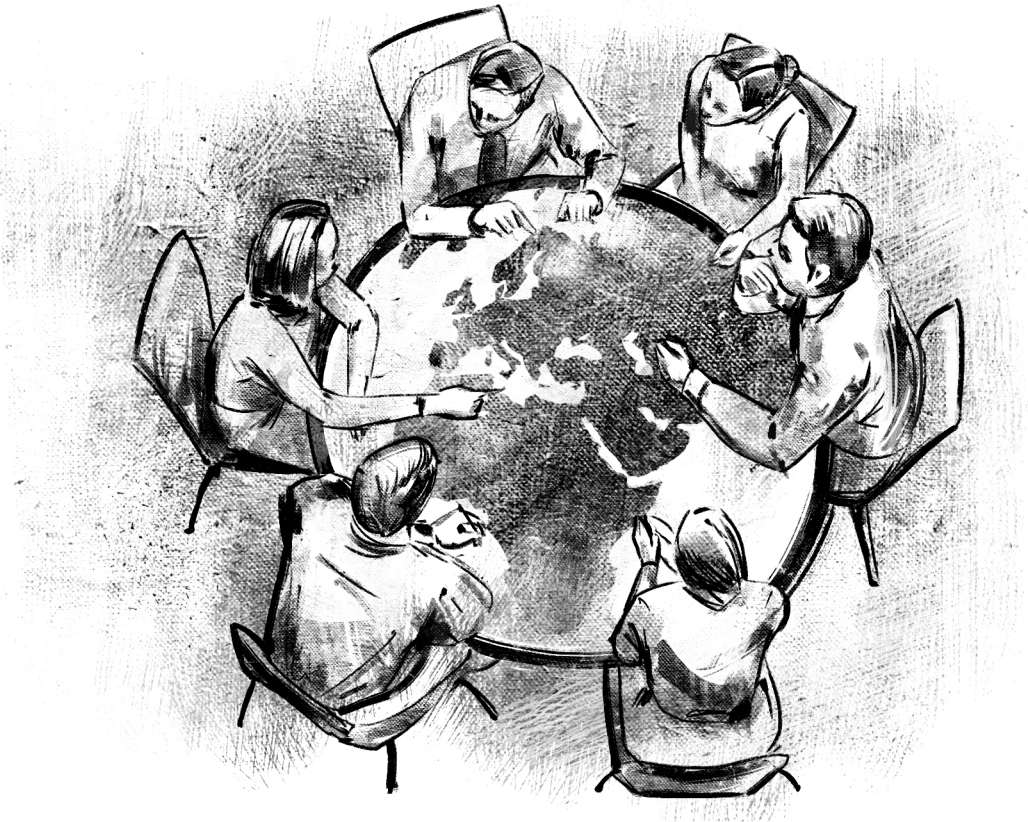
66 Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot,” 436–37.

67 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 134–36.

68 Mackinder distinguished this railroad belt for the purpose of dividing geographic regions according to their resource endowment and population. Halford J. Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* 21, no. 4 (1943): 598–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20029780>.

69 Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals*, 186. Raleigh’s original statement was: “He who commands the sea controls trade and commerce, he who controls trade and commerce commands the wealth and riches of the world, and he who controls wealth controls the world.” Quoted in Archibald S. Hurd, “Coal, Trade, and the Empire,” *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 44, no. 261 (1898): 722. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/coal-trade-empire/docview/2656708/se-2>.

70 Nicholas J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 16–17, 41.



effectively controlled by a centralized government. The latter is again divided into its location in the world, in relation to “the land masses and oceans of the world,” and its regional location, in relation to other regional competitors. The location itself does not change, but its significance — or relative value — does: with changes in the center of world power, routes of communication, and military and transportation technologies.<sup>71</sup>

Spykman outlined what is perhaps his most well-known contribution, the “rimland” theory, in his posthumously published work, *The Geography of the Peace*. It is essentially an extension of *America’s Strategy*, in which he argued that the security of the United States depends neither on insularity nor on a “world federation,” but on the country’s active participation in Eurasian power politics. The “rimland” is the intermediate region along the littorals of Mackinder’s Heartland, which serves as “a vast buffer ... between [sea power] and land power.”<sup>72</sup> Should this area be occupied by the Axis powers, the western hemisphere would effectively be encircled.

This may not be an immediate and insurmountable military problem, given logistical difficulties. But further developments of airpower might change the situation. Moreover, the Old World’s combined resources would overwhelm the New World’s: The United States could face a significant challenge supplying essential raw materials from outside the western hemisphere. To forestall such a possibility, Spykman argued that America should maintain the balance of power in the rimland. Seen in this light, World War II was fought over “the rimland littoral of Europe and Asia.” Looking ahead, Spykman argued that who controls the rimlands would continue to be America’s most important strategic question.<sup>73</sup>

Although misunderstood at times, Spykman was not a determinist. He knew well the changing value of geography depending on such factors as technology, demography, and the distribution of power. Spykman argued that “special ‘geopolitical’ regions are not geographic regions defined by a fixed and permanent topography but areas determined ... by geography and ... dynamic shifts in the centers of

71 Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy, I,” 40; Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy, II,” *American Political Science Review* 32, no. 2 (1938): 213–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1948667>; Nicholas J. Spykman and Abbie A. Rollins, “Geographic Objectives in Foreign Policy, I,” *American Political Science Review* 33, no. 3 (1939): 391–410, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1948794>; Nicholas J. Spykman and Abbie A. Rollins, “Geographic Objectives in Foreign Policy, II,” *American Political Science Review* 33, no. 4 (1939): 591–614, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1949493>.

72 Nicholas J. Spykman and Helen R. Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944), 40–41.

73 Spykman and Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace*, x.



power.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Spykman explicitly distinguished his geopolitics from the “organic state” theory, which rejects individual freedom.<sup>75</sup>

This brief examination of classical geopolitics reveals distinctive characteristics of geopolitics in three interrelated areas: the subject of analysis, its causal mechanism, and its ontology. First, these theorists were concerned, above all, with the most pressing politico-strategic question of their time, namely, how to safeguard their nations’ security in the face of international conflict. Specifically, they tried to identify *where* to direct foreign policy: for Mahan it was the Caribbean and later Asia, for Mackinder the heartland, and for Spykman the rimland. In other words, the three geopoliticians were essentially developing theories of foreign policy with a particular focus on the spatial dimension. This makes them “grand strategists” in modern parlance. Seen as such, classical geopolitics in its original form, whose interest lay with politics, was certainly different from political geography, which concerns itself primarily with geography.

Relatedly, classical geopolitical theories contained unique causal mechanisms. Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman argued that their respective nations should focus on particular areas as “natural seats of power,”<sup>76</sup> due to natural resources, terrain, population, and the like — that is, geography. To wit, geopolitics posits geography, especially physical geography, as an independent variable in order to understand the strategic environment. This distinguishes geopolitics from not only political geography, where geography is the dependent variable, but also those theories often described as “geopolitical.” For instance, Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis is only half-geopolitical, because “civilizations” predict the locus of international conflict.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, Immanuel Wallerstein’s “World-System” theory is perhaps more geopolitical, given that the international division of labor between the “core” and the “periphery” is at least partially explained in spatial terms.<sup>78</sup>

However, classical geopoliticians were not geographic determinists whose focus was only on physical features of the earth. As illustrated above, geographic features were always combined with other variables, including technology, political structure,

and the distribution of power. The same geographic features, combined with human factors, are manifested differently across time: Large territories, long coastlines and inland waterways, and a central location can be good or bad, depending on the historical circumstances. In other words, Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman considered human factors to account for how the meaning of the Earth’s physical features changed over the long term.

This emphasis on the material environment constitutes the final characteristic of geopolitical theory: a structural-materialist ontology. It has already been suggested that geography, an ontologically material factor, is the independent variable from which to deduce foreign policy. Geography is structural, that is, it exists independently from, and at times shapes, the agents — in this case, states. All three thinkers acknowledged the possibility of the agent altering the environment, most significantly with the aid of technology. But there is more to it. They all attributed the cause of conflict, for which nations need foreign policy, to structural factors: Mahan to the clash of commercial interests, Mackinder to the “unequal growth” of nations, and Spykman to “anarchy.” From the theoretical standpoint, classical geopolitics was a structural-materialist approach that derived the explanation for foreign policy from the geographic structure of the world. These three men eschewed, by and large, analysis of individual statesmen and their psyches. For this reason, as some scholars have pointed out, geopolitics represented the first attempt to move away from the agent to the structure.<sup>79</sup>

In sum, classical geopolitics, as conceived by Mackinder, Mahan, and Spykman, was essentially a group of theories on the geographic/spatial orientation of foreign policy. To locate their strategic points of focus, these geopoliticians used geography as a key explanatory variable. But since the value of geographic features depended on context, they examined human factors together with physical geography. Their emphasis on geographic factors as given makes geopolitics ontologically structural-materialist. These three characteristics — the subject of analysis, the causal mechanism, and the ontology — flow from the fact that the classical geopoliticians used geography

74 Spykman and Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace*, 6.

75 Spykman, *America’s Strategy*, 207–09; and Spykman and Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace*, 5–6.

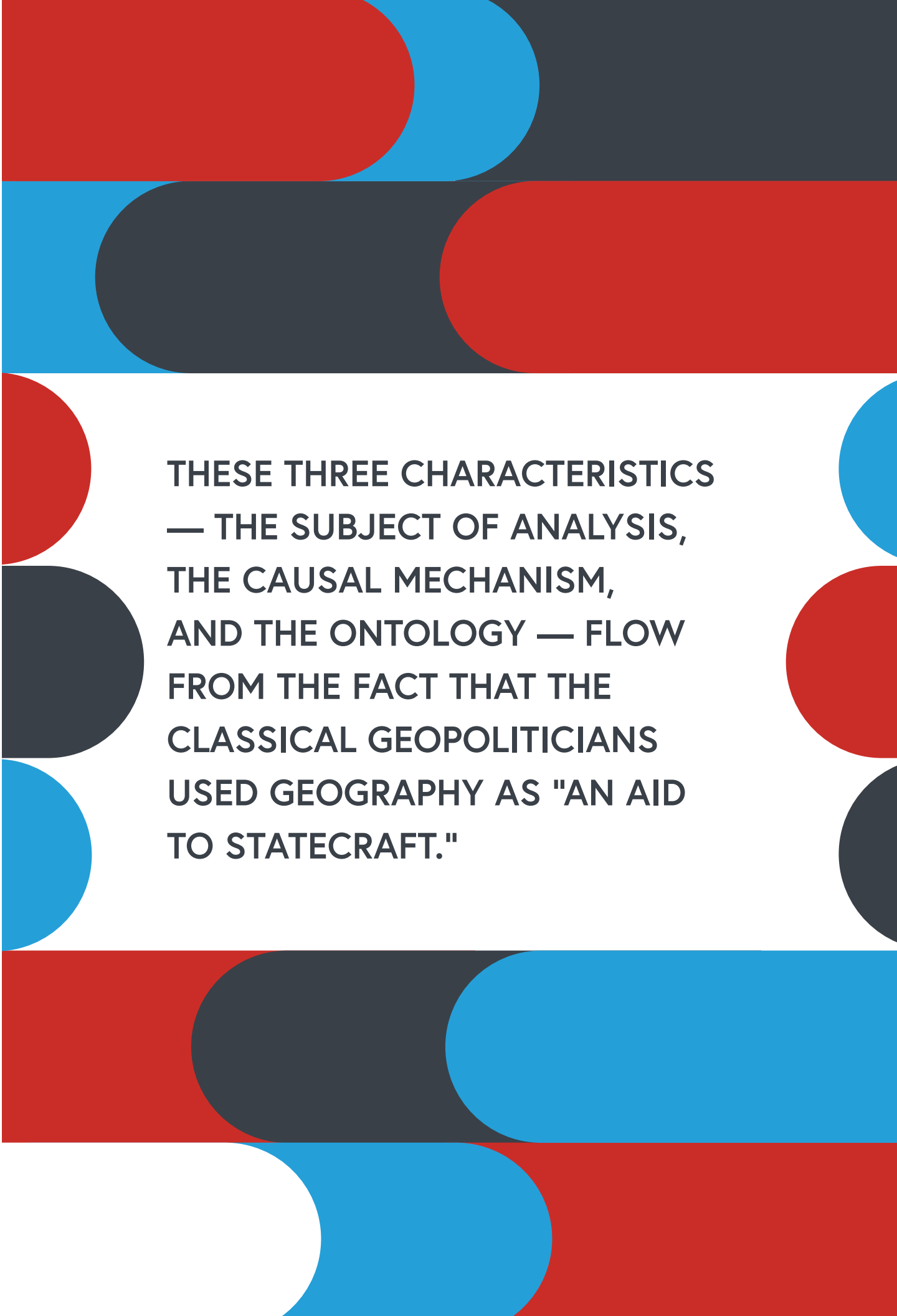
76 The term is from Mackinder, “Geographical Pivot,” 435.

77 In fairness, Huntington mentioned proximity, albeit in passing. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>.

78 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I*.

79 The other such approach was Marxist theories of imperialism. A.J.R. Groom, André Barrinha, and William C. Olson, *International Relations Then and Now: Origins and Trends in Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 29–30. For similar interpretations, Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity*, 181; Joseph M. Parent and Joshua M. Baron, “Elder Abuse: How the Moderns Mistreat Classical Realism,” *International Studies Review* 13, no. 2 (2011): 193–213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2011.01021.x>; and John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chaps. 5 and 7.



The background features a complex pattern of overlapping shapes in red, blue, and dark grey. At the top, there are horizontal bands of red and blue. Below these, a dark grey shape overlaps with a red one. The central area is white, containing the text. The bottom section consists of horizontal bands of red and blue, with a dark grey shape overlapping a blue one. The overall design is modern and geometric.

**THESE THREE CHARACTERISTICS  
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as “an aid to statecraft.” Also, they make geopolitics a sort of applied social science compatible with modern international relations. Not surprisingly, geopolitics quickly became institutionalized in U.S. strategic education, especially during and after World War II.

### Institutionalization of Geopolitics

The second half of the 20th century is often described as a period in which geopolitics declined. To be sure, the use of the term “geopolitics” went down significantly in public discourse after World War II.<sup>80</sup> Scholars have identified various personal, domestic, and international causes for this decline, from Spykman’s early death and the closure of geography departments to the development of strategic nuclear weapons systems and superpower bipolarity during the Cold War, which seemingly diminished the importance of geographic knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Above all, German *Geopolitik*’s somewhat unfair guilt-by-association with the Nazis is often credited as the major contributing factor.<sup>82</sup> Edward Mead Earle, one of the major proponents of the geopolitical approach in the 1940s, cautioned U.S. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal to “stay away from any word like geopolitics.”<sup>83</sup> Although the term disappeared from public discourse, geopolitical analysis, informing national strategy with reference to geographic features, was still relevant and therefore on the minds of American strategists and educators for some time after World War II. Several elite institutions — in particular, Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service, Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Studies, and Yale’s Institute of International Studies —

made geopolitics the foundation of their approaches to international affairs. In the late 1930s, for instance, Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service started offering two courses on geopolitics at the behest of the school’s founder, Reverend Edmund Walsh. Walsh himself was a geopolitician in his own right. His book *Total Power* was based on his interviews with Karl Haushofer. After returning from Nuremberg, Walsh hired experts on geopolitics at Georgetown. In fact, his vision for the school was to be like Haushofer’s geopolitical institute, producing geographically informed assessments of world politics. Seminars on geopolitics lasted at Georgetown until the 1950s.<sup>84</sup>

At Princeton, several individuals advocated geopolitical analysis. Earle was one of them. According to one historian, he “whipped [eclectic ingredients] to create ... security studies,” a subset of the broader field of international relations.<sup>85</sup> For our purposes, he incorporated the geopolitical approach into the study of strategy. Notwithstanding his reluctance to use the term “geopolitics,” Earle occasionally invited geographers such as Derwent Whittlesey to his seminar on military strategy. He also suggested to Henry Holt & Company that the publisher reprint Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals*, for which he wrote the introduction.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the first edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* was based upon Earle’s seminar and included chapters on Haushofer and Mahan.<sup>87</sup>

Generally considered pioneers of foreign policy analysis, Harold and Margaret Sprout also showed keen interest in geopolitical analysis throughout their long careers.<sup>88</sup> The Sprouts had already written an

80 For instance, “Geopolitics,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed Dec. 15, 2022, [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=geopolitics&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=geopolitics&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3).

81 On Spykman’s death, see Gray, “Spykman,” 874; and Or Rosenboim, “Geopolitics and Empire: Visions of Regional World Order in the 1940s,” *Modern Intellectual History* 12, no. 2 (2015): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000547>. On the closure of geography departments, see Neil Smith, “Academic War Over the Field of Geography: The Elimination of Geography at Harvard, 1947–1951,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 2 (1987): 155–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1987.tb00151.x>; and McDougall, “Why Geography Matters,” 227–28. On the notion that periphery no longer existed under bipolarity, see Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (Summer 1964): 881–909, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863>.

82 Agnew and Muscarà, *Political Geography*, 115. On fundamental differences between Nazism and *Geopolitik*, see Mark Bassin, “Race Contra Space: The Conflict Between German *Geopolitik* and National Socialism,” *Political Geography Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1987): 115–34, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827\(87\)90002-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-9827(87)90002-4).

83 Quoted in Peter Francis Coogan, *Geopolitics and the Intellectual Origins of Containment* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1991), 227, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/geopolitics-intellectual-origins-containment/docview/303924442/se-2?accountid=11752>. The same view is expressed in Earle’s review of *America’s Strategy*: Edward Mead Earle, “Power Politics and American World Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 1943): 94–95, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2144430>.

84 Edmund A. Walsh, *Total Power: A Footnote to History* (New York: Doubleday, 1948); Coogan, “Geopolitics,” 65–66, 332–37; and Specter, *Atlantic Realists*, 128.

85 David Ekbladh, “Present at the Creation: Edward Mead Earle and the Depression-Era Origins of Security Studies,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/12): 140, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00067](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00067).

86 William Fox, “Geopolitics and International Relations,” in *On Geopolitics: Classical and Nuclear*, ed. Ciro E. Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1985), 27; and Coogan, “Geopolitics,” 140, 145. Perhaps Earle’s interest in Mackinder is not surprising given his earlier work on the Bagdad Railway. Edward Mead Earle, *Turkey, the Great Powers, and the Bagdad Railway: A Study in Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

87 Edward Mead Earle, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952).

88 As their students wrote, they had “lifelong interest in the interplay between geographic factors and new developments in science and technology.” James N. Rosenau, Vincent Davis, and Maurice A. East, eds., *The Analysis of International Politics: Essays in Honor of Harold and Margaret Sprout* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 3.

important book in the 1930s on the U.S. Navy that displayed Mahan's influence.<sup>89</sup> Their lectures for the Navy's V-12 program resulted in the publication of *Foundations of National Power*, a textbook on international politics that included excerpts from geopolitical writings.<sup>90</sup> After World War II, the Sprouts, both together and individually, kept publishing on the influence of geography on international politics.<sup>91</sup> Margaret wrote the Mahan chapter in Earle's edited volume.<sup>92</sup> Harold, who had taught political geography at Stanford, ended up managing the relocation of the Institute of International Studies, arguably the most important institute for geopolitical studies in America, from Yale to Princeton in 1951.<sup>93</sup>

Created in 1935 under Spykman's leadership, the Institute of International Studies promoted policy-relevant and interdisciplinary research, advocating for an interventionist approach based on power-political analysis. This went against the idealistic and isolationist intellectual currents in U.S. universities, which relied on international law and America's insular position to safeguard national security. The Institute of International Studies brought together an impressive group of scholars — in George Kennan's view, "the best and soundest" in the field.<sup>94</sup> Since geography affected national power, geopolitics naturally became a major research theme at the institute.<sup>95</sup> In addition to Spykman's work, Brooks Emeny wrote *The Strategy of Raw Materials*, which caught the War Department's attention.<sup>96</sup> Arnold Wolfers emphasized the importance of geography as it relates to national power. His co-edited volume on Anglo-American foreign policy tradition is essentially predicated upon the dichotomous nature of land and sea powers, a classic theme in geopolitics.<sup>97</sup>

Later, Institute of International Studies members went on to lead similar power-focused and policy-oriented research initiatives across the nation, essentially laying the foundation for modern international relations. Wolfers was recruited by the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies to run the Foreign Policy Institute in a similar manner to the Institute of International Studies. William T. R. Fox, who had brought in University of Chicago scholars such as Gabriel Almond and Bernard Brodie, moved to Columbia University, where he founded the Institute of War and Peace Studies. This institute would later feature many prominent international relations scholars, including Huntington, Robert Jervis, and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski's *Grand Chessboard* is considered a modern classic of geopolitics and American foreign policy.<sup>98</sup> Brodie, one of the most influential nuclear theorists of the 20th century, went to RAND, only to be joined by other Institute of International Studies alumni such as William Kaufmann. At Princeton, the Institute of International Studies became the Center for International Studies and continuously hosted the who's who of the field: Gordon Craig, Peter Paret, and George Modolski, among others.<sup>99</sup> In short, it served as an academy of American international relations during the early Cold War years.

An equally important development was the inclusion of geopolitics in professional military education, which indirectly affected strategic planning. U.S. military organizations had already been collecting geographic data to inform military strategy and foreign policy since the end of the 19th century, beginning with the creation of the Office of Naval Intelligence in 1882 and the Military Information Division in 1885.<sup>100</sup> During

89 Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939).

90 Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Foundations of National Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945).

91 For instance, see Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, "Geography and International Politics in an Era of Revolutionary Change," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 1 (1960): 145–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200276000400111>.

92 Margaret Sprout, "Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power" in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Earle, Craig, and Gilbert, 415–45.

93 Paulo Jorge Batista Ramos, *Role of the Yale Institute of International Studies in the Construction of the United States National Security Ideology, 1935–1951* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manchester, 2003), 139, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/role-yale-institute-international-studies/docview/1774213325/se-2?accountid=11752>.

94 Ramos, "Yale Institute," 16.

95 Inderjeet Parmar, "To Relate Knowledge and Action: The Impact of the Rockefeller Foundation on Foreign Policy Thinking During America's Rise to Globalism 1939–1945," *Minerva* 40, no. 3 (2002): 247–48, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019572526066>; Ramos, "Yale Institute," 96–67, 123–25; and Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 37, 39–40.

96 Ramos, "Yale Institute," 164–65.

97 Arnold Wolfers and Laurence W. Martin, *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs: Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956); and Coogan, "Geopolitics," 337–39.

98 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997).

99 Fox, "Geopolitics and International Relations," 22; Ramos, "Yale Institute," 141–43, 167–68; and Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 84.

100 Robert G. Angevine, "The Rise and Fall of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1882–1892: A Technological Perspective," *Journal of Military History* 62, no. 2 (April 1998): 291–312, <https://doi.org/10.2307/120718>; Robert G. Angevine, "Mapping the Northern Frontier: Canada and the Origins of the U.S. Army's Military Information Division, 1885–1898," *Intelligence and National Security* 16, no. 3 (2001): 121–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520412331306240>.





World War I, President Woodrow Wilson created “The Inquiry,” headquartered at the American Geographical Society, to collect geographical data and prepare maps for peace negotiations. Wilson’s brain trust took part in the preparation for “The Fourteen Points” speech. Later, many of its members, including Bowman, joined forces with Elihu Root’s dinner club to form the Council on Foreign Relations. Bowman would later ask Mackinder to write a reflection on his “Heartland theory” in its publication, *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>101</sup>

The marginalization of geopolitical analysis in mainstream international relations scholarship is not surprising given their important differences.

But it was geopolitical theories that connected geographic data with national policy.<sup>102</sup> During and after World War II, therefore, Walsh, Earle, the Sprouts, Spykman, and Wolfers, as well as Robert Strausz-Hupé, another prominent scholar of geopolitics, either served in military organizations, such as the Office of Strategic Services, or lectured at various professional education institutions.<sup>103</sup> At West Point, Col. Herman Beukema, who led the Department of Economics, Government, and History from 1930 to 1947, promoted what can be essentially described as geopolitical analysis. Civilian scholars started devel-

oping a program on international affairs for naval Reserve Officers’ Training Corps students, resulting in Harold Sprout’s course at Princeton in March 1944, which began with a quote from Mackinder’s “Pivot” article. By the mid-1950s, U.S. military schools had essentially “institutionalized geopolitics.”<sup>104</sup>

Paradoxically, the rise of Morgenthau’s classical realism, made possible partially by the institutionalization of geopolitics, resulted in the decline of geopolitics in U.S. academia. By the mid-1950s, the discipline of international relations was going through an identity crisis. At issue was how the field could distinguish itself from more established, traditional disciplines, such as diplomatic history and international law. To many, the answer was grounding the field on a firmer theoretical footing.<sup>105</sup> As late as 1954, geopolitics was still a venerable tradition in academia, as witnessed by a Council of Foreign Relations meeting where Spykman’s geopolitics was considered as a major theoretical approach to the study of international relations.<sup>106</sup> By then, however, no scholar had come after Spykman to produce another major theoretical work on geopolitics.<sup>107</sup> In this context, the Rockefeller Foundation’s “gambit” to promote Morgenthau’s realism marginalized other approaches, including geopolitics.<sup>108</sup>

The marginalization of geopolitical analysis in mainstream international relations scholarship is not surprising given their important differences. First, classical realism and geopolitics had fundamentally different ontological focal points. For Morgenthau, key variables were ideational, as exemplified by his emphasis on the timeless concepts of “interest” and “power.”<sup>109</sup> Later, academic realism became even

101 Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 25, 118–35, 181–82, 192; and David M. McCourt, “The Inquiry and the Birth of International Relations, 1917–19,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 63, no. 3 (2017): 399–400, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12376>.

102 Fox, “Geopolitics and International Relations,” 30.

103 Their involvement in military organizations are described in Coogan, “Geopolitics,” esp. 196–238 (chap. 6); and Ramos, “Yale Institute,” 152–91 (chap. 5). On Strausz-Hupé, Andrew Crampton and Gearóid Ó. Tuathail, “Intellectuals, Institutions and Ideology: The Case of Robert Strausz-Hupé and ‘American Geopolitics,’” *Political Geography* 15, no. 6–7 (1996): 533–55, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(96\)83606-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(96)83606-7).

104 Coogan, “Geopolitics,” 102–05, 217–29, 401, 423 (quote).

105 Brian C. Schmidt, “The Need for Theory: International Relations and the Council on Foreign Relations Study Group on the Theory of International Relations, 1953–1954,” *International History Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 589–606, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1646780>.

106 These included Carr’s historical theorizing, Harold Lasswell’s scientific approach, Marxist theories of imperialism, Wilson’s idealism, and, of course, Morgenthau’s realism. See various minutes of meetings in McCourt, *American Power*.

107 On the lack of theoretical canon, see Ramos, “Yale Institute,” 183.

108 Nicholas Guilhot, “The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory,” *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 4 (2008): 281–304, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2008.00052.x>. For the broader institutional context in which realism rose in U.S. academia, Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*, 78–87.

109 Lucian M. Ashworth, “Chronicle of a Death Foretold? The 1953–4 CFR Study Group Meeting and the Decline of International Thought,” *The International History Review* 42, no. 3 (2020): 660–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1655780>. Compare with Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

more abstract when it took a systematic turn, further neglecting geography and geopolitics.<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Waltz's structural realism privileges the distribution of material capabilities, but reduces the complex strategic environment under which states operate into a simple diagram. Thus, what becomes important is "polarity," or the sheer number of great powers, in an imaginary and aspatial "international system."<sup>111</sup> In contrast, geopolitical analysis differentiates strategic spaces depending on their geographic features.<sup>112</sup>

## Geography in International Relations

### Geopolitical Hypotheses

If geopolitics as an intellectual paradigm has declined, its basic premise still undergirds much of international relations scholarship. At the deepest level, the fact remains that states, arguably still the most important units in international politics, are fundamentally territorial entities and that their most important activities — maintaining internal security and order, defending borders and territories, and protecting citizens abroad — take place on land and at sea. The key components of their power — military hardware, economic resources, and population — are distributed unevenly and transported across various geographies. As the geographer Jean Gottmann ob-

served long ago, "The political divisions are the *raison d'être* of international relations."<sup>113</sup> Technological developments have not changed this fundamental reality. Not surprisingly, geography, the core of geopolitics, still occupies an important, if unsatisfactory, position in the study of international relations.

Accordingly, it is worth examining the ways in which international relations scholars have used geography to explain foreign policy and grand strategy. Below, I identify the concepts or theories in international relations scholarship that imply some causal mechanism involving geographic features. Broadly speaking, there are three lines of inquiry. Geography is understood in international relations as an independent variable that conditions a state's objectives, capabilities, or strategic orientation. To wit, these three elements can be conceptualized, respectively, as the ends, means, and ways of statecraft (Table 1).

First, if a state's ultimate goals (*ends*) are security and power,<sup>114</sup> they are manifested in the real world more concretely as "buffers" and "resources," respectively.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps this line of scholarship constitutes the most well-developed body of literature making use of geography as an explanatory variable.<sup>116</sup> The strategic value of a place may primarily lie in its ability to deny an opponent access to major lines of communication, territory, and resources. Historically, Britain sought to preserve the independence of

Category	Geographic Features	Concepts and Theories
Ends (objectives)	Strategic depth/buffer Natural resources	Security Power
Means (capabilities)	Distance Terrain	Loss-of-strength gradient Stopping power of water Strategic distance
Ways (strategic orientation)	Location Distance Terrain	Land/sea power Offense-defense balance Balancing/bandwagoning

Table 1. *Geography in International Relations*

110 Daniel H. Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410008429419>; Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, "How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 87–118, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00217](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00217). For a contemporary critique, see Stanley H. Hoffmann, "International Relations: The Long Road to Theory," *World Politics* 11, no. 3 (1959): 34–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009198>.

111 To see how Waltz did this, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 100 (especially figure 5.2).


112 While Deudney pointed out that the main distinction between realism and geopolitics is their unit of analysis, both in fact focus primarily on the state and its external behavior. Deudney, "Geopolitics and Change," 98.

113 Jean Gottmann, "Geography and International Relations," *World Politics* 3, no. 2 (1951): 153, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2008950>.

114 Both security and power are considered to be a state's ends by defensive and offensive realists, respectively. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001): 128–61, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560543>.

115 Peter Huggill, "Transitions in Hegemony: A Theory Based on State Type and Technology," in William Thompson, ed., *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35.

116 Good summaries of the literature on the influence of territory upon conflicts can be found in Paul R. Hensel, "Territory: Geography, Contentious Issues, and World Politics," in *What Do We Know About War?* ed. John A. Vazquez, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 3–26; and Monica Duffy Toft, "Territory and War," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 185–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313515695>. A more recent work positing geography as an object of statecraft is Dan Altman, "By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2017): 881–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049>.

The background features a central white rectangular area containing text. This area is framed by a border of overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in red, blue, and dark grey. The shapes are arranged in a pattern that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some shapes appearing to overlap others.

**LASTLY, INTERNATIONAL  
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the Low Countries so that they could act as buffers against territorial threats from continental powers of Europe.<sup>117</sup> In addition, as Morgenthau notes, the sheer size of its territory allows a state to absorb damage from strategic bombing in wartime.<sup>118</sup> Alternatively, occupying a piece of fertile or resource-rich land can add material power to the state controlling it. Throughout much of human history, the possession of, or easy access to, forests — which supplied timber with which to build weapons and buildings — was a major factor that determined the fates of empires.<sup>119</sup> In the early 20th century, the transition from coal to oil, ushered in by the development of the internal combustion engine, fundamentally altered resource requirements for the British Royal Navy, thereby increasing the importance of Persia.<sup>120</sup> Other resources, such as food and water, are also crucial for national survival.<sup>121</sup>

In addition to affecting national power, geography also shapes the strategic domains in which states operate, conditioning their overall capabilities (*means*). Political scientists have been keen to use distance as an explanatory variable for force projection. As Kenneth Boulding wrote, a state's "military and political power diminishes as we move a unit distance away from its home base."<sup>122</sup> During the Russo-Japanese War, for instance, Russia's massive manpower and fleets could not reach the distant theater in the Far East on time, thereby contributing to its eventual defeat.<sup>123</sup> Another geographic factor that explains the power-projection capabilities of states is terrain. Geographic factors can even modify the effects of distance at times. China and India, although close to one another, did not have much interaction until relatively recently due to the mountain ranges that separate the two.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, John Mearsheimer

argues that oceans hinder the movement and power-projection of armed forces — hence the "stopping power of water." According to Mearsheimer, the late 19th-century power transition between Britain and the United States did not lead to conflict due to the buffering effects of the sea.<sup>125</sup>

Some recent works have combined both physical geography with human factors to assess power-projection capabilities. Patrick Porter has developed a more sophisticated concept — "strategic distance" — which contrasts with physical distance. Combining geography with technology, Porter demonstrates how strategic distance, a state's ability to project power *affordably*, still constrains the "Global Village" theory that the United States can project power and fix problems anywhere on earth. In addition to the logistical limits posed by geography, Porter considered two factors: technology and human agency. The development of defensive technology partially cancels an opponent's offensive capabilities. Meanwhile, states resist outside intervention to maintain their sovereignty, thus limiting the power of weapons technology. Porter thus concludes that "the offensive shrinking power of technology-driven globalization is grossly overstated."<sup>126</sup> Similarly, Øystein Tunsjø has built on the "stopping power of water" to account for the interplay between geography and the distribution of power. In brief, he posits that Asia's maritime geography would make an emerging bipolarity between the United States and China different from the U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War which took place primarily in continental Europe. Specifically, Tunsjø predicts that the "stopping power" would delay the balancing behavior of China's neighbors, increase the likelihood of a limited conflict between the United States and China, and stabilize peripheral areas.<sup>127</sup>

117 On "buffers" and similar concepts, see Michael Greenfield Partem, "The Buffer System in International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (1983): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002783027001001>; Tanisha M. Fazal, "State Death in the International System," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 311–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582048>; Rajan Menon and Jack L. Snyder, "Buffer Zones: Anachronism, Power Vacuum, or Confidence Builder?" *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 962–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000122>; Evan N. Resnick, "Interests, Ideologies, and Great Power Spheres of Influence," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 3 (2022): 563–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221098217>; and Boaz Atzili and Min Jung Kim, "Buffer Zones and International Rivalry: Internal and External Geographic Separation Mechanisms," *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 645–65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad028>.

118 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 127–35. For the continued relevance of territory in the nuclear age, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), especially 22–24.

119 John R. McNeill, "Woods and Warfare in World History," *Environmental History* 9, no. 3 (2004): 388–410, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985766>.

120 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 138–48.

121 Eric J. Hamilton and Brian C. Rathbun, "Scarce Differences: Toward a Material and Systemic Foundation for Offensive and Defensive Realism," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 436–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.816125>.

122 Quoted in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 56.

123 Steven G. Marks, *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850–1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 172–73, 202; and Constantine Pleshakov, *The Tsar's Last Armada: The Epic Journey to the Battle of Tsushima* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 91–111.

124 Spykman and Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace*, 40–41.

125 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 44.

126 Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War and the Limits of Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 9.

127 Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).



Finally, geography, especially the location and the lay of the land, affects a state's overall strategic orientation, or its preferred ways to achieve ends with available means.<sup>128</sup> A large body of work on the "offense-defense" balance, pioneered by Jervis, takes into account geography and technology in determining a state's overall military posture, or the "relative ease of attack and defense."<sup>129</sup> While some analysts have argued for its exclusion, geography still looms large in the "offense-defense" literature.<sup>130</sup> But there is a flip side to this equation: Ease of attack for one state translates to an opponent's vulnerability. Building on this insight, Stephen Walt argues that proximity, along with other variables (aggregate power, offensive capabilities, and intent), shapes a state's threat perception and therefore affects its strategic behavior, e.g., balancing or bandwagoning.<sup>131</sup> Barry Posen found that geographically encircled countries may develop offensive military doctrines, but ultimately he argued that geography's overall influence is not as pronounced as that of the balance of power.<sup>132</sup> Lastly, international relations scholars have not completely forgotten the contrast between sea and land powers, a major theme in classical geopolitics. This land-sea dichotomy is often used to explain the differential balancing behavior between continental and maritime states.<sup>133</sup> By the same token, the argument for "offshore balancing" is predicated on the fact that Britain and America are both maritime powers insulated from the Eurasian continent.<sup>134</sup>

## Assessments

These scholars' collective efforts have contributed to advancing our understanding of international politics in general and the role of geography in it in particular. Still, there are three broad shortcomings. First, scholars often use easily quantifiable or codable variables, such as physical distance or the allocation of resource and personnel. One flaw with this approach is that distance and terrain manifest themselves *asymmetrically*. Before the age of steam power, a ship bound for South America had to sail from New York all the way to the Azores to catch winds for a westward voyage.<sup>135</sup> Likewise, the English Channel might have prevented the invasion of the British Isles by a continental power, but it did not stop Britain's expansion throughout the world.<sup>136</sup> After all, the superiority of waterborne transportation was the predicate for Mahan's argument for sea power. "It is," Mahan wrote, "facility of transmission, that has made sea power so multifold in manifestation and in efficacy."<sup>137</sup>

A closely related issue is the question of determinism. While geography remains constant, its meaning changes, as classical geopoliticians knew so well. This aspect — the relativity of space — is underexplored in international relations scholarship.<sup>138</sup> Location A may be three kilometers away from location B in absolute terms, but the time, cost, and possibility of traversing this same space varies. For instance, the development of the steam engine reduced the total distance of a

128 There are other recent works making use of geography as an explanatory variable, but they do not establish how certain geographic features affect foreign policy specifically. For instance, see Joshua R. Iitzkowitz Shiffrin, "Partnership or Predation? How Rising States Contend with Declining Great Powers," *International Security* 45, no. 1 (2020): 90–126, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00384](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00384); and Norrin M. Ripsman and Igor Kovac, "Material Sources of Grand Strategy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, ed. Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 205–20.

129 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>. The expression is from David Blagden, "When Does Competition Become Conflict? Technology, Geography, and the Offense-Defense Balance," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab007>.

130 For instance, Keir Lieber argued for its exclusion in *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics Over Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 30–33. Some important works and reviews on the "offense-defense" balance include: Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and How Can We Measure It?" *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998): 44–82, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.22.4.44>; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (1995): 660–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419509347600>; and Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998): 5–43, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.22.4.5>.

131 Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>; and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

132 Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

133 Some recent works using this dichotomy are Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 7–43, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00001](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00001); Evan B. Montgomery, "Competitive Strategies Against Continental Powers: The Geopolitics of Sino-Indian-American Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2013): 76–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.736383>; and Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 51–86, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00216](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00216).

134 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*.

135 Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), 105–6.

136 John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shiffrin, and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics* (2021): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272100222X>.

137 Mahan, *Problem of Asia*, 20.

138 Starr, *On Geopolitics*, 22–29.

voyage by a significant margin.<sup>139</sup> But its effects were not merely one of “time-space compression.”<sup>140</sup> In fact, steam-powered vessels required an extensive network of coaling stations and maintenance facilities, without which their movement would be restricted.<sup>141</sup> Another factor is the socio-political context. During the Spanish-American War, Britain denied fuel to the Spanish fleet at Port Said pursuant to international law, complicating Madrid’s already cumbersome logistics.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, as Strausz-Hupé observed, Asiatic empires were able to maintain a high degree of efficiency in communication even without modern technology, due in part to their organizational finesse.<sup>143</sup> In short, the meaning of geography is *relative*, depending on various human factors.

Finally, these disparate studies deal with the ends, means, and ways separately. Geography, however, underlies all three elements of statecraft, as long as states remain territorial entities — in other words, geography is *comprehensive*. For instance, the Habsburg Empire’s rivers, vast territory, and precarious location at the center of eastern Europe circumscribed available resources, security requirements, and, therefore, grand strategy.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, complicated by the problem of moving fleets between the two oceans, shaped War Plan Orange, America’s strategy to protect its Pacific holdings from Japan.<sup>145</sup> Spykman explained this best when he wrote,

*Security must ... be understood in terms of the integrity of control over the land ... [T]he physical characteristics of the territory will influence directly the manner in which that security is main-*

*tained because power is determined to a great extent by geography and natural resources ... [T]he nation has to act on the basis of the strength it can mobilize, either within its own territory or through its allies and protectors.*<sup>146</sup>

Scholars, therefore, should consider geography in a comprehensive manner.

### Future Research

Accordingly, future research in international relations should address the comprehensiveness, relativity, and asymmetry of geography to complement the existing research. Here, some suggestions are offered. First, scholars need to pay attention to the broader environment in which states and state systems are embedded. For instance, the offense-defense theory has been mostly applied to land battles. How this dynamic works out at sea merits further exploration.<sup>147</sup> More broadly, the concept of the “international system” in the neorealist tradition is based on continental Europe’s experience. Thus, various theories deriving from this paradigm may not apply to different geographic conditions.<sup>148</sup> William Wohlforth and others found that the balance-of-power theory, a key pillar of realism, has not held in past state systems outside of Europe, especially when these systems stopped expanding their geographic scope.<sup>149</sup> Historian Ludwig Dehio argued that, even in Europe, the balance of power was maintained not within itself, but with the introduction of new powers from the periphery.<sup>150</sup> Looking into the future, geopolitical analysis may provide useful insights into how

139 According to one estimate, the overall sail distance was 50 percent greater than steam for trans-Atlantic voyages. N.A.M. Rodger, “Weather, Geography and Naval Power in the Age of Sail,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437760>.

140 On the concept of “time-space compression,” see David Harvey, “Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80, no. 3 (1990): 418–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1990.tb00305.x>.

141 Steven Gray, “Fuelling Mobility: Coal and Britain’s Naval Power, c. 1870–1914,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, no. 58 (October 2017): 92–103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2017.06.013>.

142 David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 142–44, 270, 275–77.

143 Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics*, 182.

144 A. Wess Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

145 Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991).

146 Spykman and Nicholl, *The Geography of the Peace*, 4.

147 On this point, see David W. Blagden, Jack S. Levy, and William R. Thompson, “Sea Powers, Continental Powers, and Balancing Theory [with Reply],” *International Security* 36, no. 2 (2011), 201–2, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_c\\_00060](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00060). Blagden briefly discusses this point in “When Does Competition Become Conflict?” 14–15.

148 On Eurocentrism in the realist tradition and its limits, see William C. Wohlforth, “Gilpinian Realism and International Relations,” *International Relations* 25, no. 4 (2011): 499–511, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117811411742>.

149 William C. Wohlforth et al., “Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (2007): 155–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107076951>.

150 Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Knopf, 1962). Similarly, Paul Schroeder noted that it was the preponderance of two “flanking” powers, Britain and Russia, that maintained stability in Europe after the Congress of Vienna. Also, by virtue of geography, they could expand outside of Europe. Paul W. Schroeder, “Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (1992): 683–706, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2164774>.



to think about new frontiers, such as outer space.<sup>151</sup>

A second area in which more research needs to be done concerns the *relativity* of geography. Critics of geopolitics are not entirely wrong: The field does tend to pay too much attention to fixed geographic features, such as distance or terrain, and debate whether specific geopolitical ideas — for instance, the “heartland” theory — still hold today.<sup>152</sup> Yet, how classical geopoliticians thought about geography, especially how its interactions with human factors change the value of a place, is worth considering. One welcome development has been the incorporation of technology into the geopolitical analysis of “means,” as in the case of Porter’s “strategic distance.” While his goal was mostly to deconstruct the “Global Village” myth, the concept of “strategic distance” can be further developed and more fruitfully used to compare the power projection capabilities of different actors in a given theater. As for the “ends” of statecraft, it is becoming increasingly important to identify and manage chokepoints in the supply of foodstuff and high-tech products, such as electric vehicle batteries

and semiconductors.<sup>153</sup> These changes will re-order the hierarchy of importance of different regions, thereby having broader strategic implications.

There are two other avenues of future research relating to relativity. First is the inclusion of political institutions. While classical geopoliticians’ concern was mostly with how domestic institutions affected national capabilities, international institutions are also an important subject in geopolitical analysis. For instance, Harvey Starr’s observation that alliances enable states to “leapfrog” natural obstacles can be combined with Porter’s strategic distance.<sup>154</sup> A second line of possible research is man-made changes to the environment itself.<sup>155</sup> The melting of Arctic ice due to climate change is a case in point: It means the opening of a new trade route for East Asian countries. For Russia, however, it will create a long and open coastline to defend, spelling an end to its impregnable “heartland” status.<sup>156</sup>

Finally, states tend to focus their diplomatic and military activities on specific frontiers due to limited resources. In other words, the spatial distribution of foreign policy is uneven, partly because of the *asymmetric* nature of geography. However, there are few, if any, analytical frameworks to explain and predict geopolitical orientation, the object of inquiry in classical geopolitical writing.<sup>157</sup> The standard realist literature yields only rudimentary predictions that states will prioritize the home front. Yet, great powers always have complicated interests across multiple frontiers.<sup>158</sup> Not surprisingly, realists’ predictions about the next strategic “hot spots” have not aged well.<sup>159</sup> In our time, ar-

Moving forward, there is much room for scholars to explore the asymmetry, relativity, and comprehensiveness of geography.

151 Everett C. Dolman, “Geostrategy in the Space Age: An Astropolitical Analysis,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437755>; Daniel Deudney, *Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

152 For a trenchant critique, see Christopher J. Fettweis, “On Heartlands and Chessboards: Classical Geopolitics, Then and Now,” *Orbis* 59, no. 2 (2015): 233–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.02.005>.

153 Rob Bailey and Laura Wellesley, *Chokepoints and Vulnerabilities in Global Food Trade* (London: Chatham House, 2017), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-06-27-chokepoints-vulnerabilities-global-food-trade-bailey-wellesley-final.pdf>; Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); *Building Resilient Supply Chains, Revitalizing American Manufacturing, and Fostering Broad-Based Growth*, The White House, June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/100-day-supply-chain-review-report.pdf>; and Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World’s Most Critical Technology* (New York: Scribner, 2022).

154 Harvey Starr, “On Geopolitics: Spaces and Places,” *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2013): 435, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12090>.

155 Simon Dalby, “The Geopolitics of Climate Change,” *Political Geography* 37 (2013): 38–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.09.004>.

156 Rodger Baker, “Revisiting Arctic Geopolitics: Climate, Competition, and Governance,” Presentation at Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC, Oct. 13, 2022.

157 There are a few exceptions. See, for instance, Michael C. Desch, “The Keys that Lock up the World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery,” *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 86–121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538766>; Robert J. Art, “Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999): 79–113, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.3.79>; and Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*.

158 Paul M. Kennedy, “The Operations Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914,” *Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 19, no. 1 (1976): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.1976.19.1.188>.

159 For instance, John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981>. An exception is Aaron L. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security* 18, no. 3 (1993): 5–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539204>.



guably one of the most important strategic questions is whether China will become a sea power or remain a land power.<sup>160</sup> Geography alone is insufficient to anticipate the future.<sup>161</sup> The analysis on states' strategic orientation can be done only when researchers properly consider geographic factors, along with human elements, in the way that Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman did.

## **Conclusion**

This article sought to bring geopolitics back to the mainstream of international relations scholarship. It did so in three different ways. An examination of various uses of the term "geopolitics" has shown that stretching the concept of geography has resulted in definitional confusion. Therefore, geography itself should be re-centered as the analytical core of geopolitics. Historically, classical geopolitics sought to inform grand strategy using geography as an explanatory variable and was thus institutionalized in U.S. strategic education. That is, geography was used as "an aid to statecraft." Finally, although largely ignored in mainstream international relations, the basic premise of geopolitics still undergirds much of its concepts and theories. Moving forward, there is much room for scholars to explore the asymmetry, relativity, and comprehensiveness of geography.

As long as human beings reside on earth and states remain territorial entities, their various challenges will have geographic referents, from strategic competition over resources and buffers to climate change and space exploration. As Gottmann observed, "The differentiation arising between compartments of space is the very foundation of any study in international relations."<sup>162</sup> Wholly "social" intellectual paradigms are ill equipped to deal with such challenges. Classical geopolitics, a long-forgotten yet important tradition in the annals of international relations, dynamically incorporates geographic features into political analysis and thus can provide useful perspectives and insights. Scholars and policymakers, therefore, would do well to dust off old tomes and learn some new ideas from geopoliticians from the past.<sup>163</sup> 📌

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160 Toshi Yoshihara, "China as a Composite Land-Sea Power: A Geostrategic Concept Revisited," Center for International Maritime Security, Jan. 6, 2021, <https://cimsec.org/china-as-a-composite-land-sea-power-a-geostrategic-concept-revisited/>.

161 Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999): 81–118, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.4.81>.

162 Gottmann, "Geography and International Relations," 165.

163 The original expression is from Todd G. Buchholz, *New Ideas from Dead Economists: An Introduction to Modern Economic Thought* (New York: Plume, 2007).