

The Meaning of Place

Francis J. Gavin



Geopolitics has shifted from contests over physical territory to competition in other domains like space, cyber, information, and nuclear security, even as traditional geography and a deep sense of place still profoundly shape international conflict. Francis J. Gavin reflects on this evolution, and celebrates Texas, the University of Texas, and the *Texas National Security Review* as uniquely positioned—through their people, institutions, and sense of place—to lead rigorous, policy-relevant scholarship on international security.

Reflecting on an excellent issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, I was struck by how geopolitics have shifted over time. In modern history through the twentieth century, states were primarily focused on control of and access to land and sea in two ways. First, they were most concerned with adjacent territories and land, worried that menacing neighbors might invade or that dangerous vacuums would emerge nearby that could generate turbulence that might be exploited by enemies. Second, after the revolutions in navigation, finance, and industrial power, economically advanced states sought territories far abroad that could supply resources and markets.¹ Land powers sought contiguous territory, sea powers sought control of the oceans to construct empire and markets abroad, and the true superpowers sought both, though often at great cost and to their own peril. This is the historical story animated by the great theorists Halford Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan and told so well by my colleague, Hal Brands, in his terrific book, *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World*.²

The articles in this issue highlight that geopolitical rivalry and competition still shape world politics, but the battles are less over formal, physical empire and the near abroad than something else. R. Lincoln Hines, Lawrence Rubin, and Dayana Alagirova highlight one of the less noticed aspects of China's strategy and statecraft in Africa and the Middle East—its space diplomacy.

Charles Mok recommends greater Western cooperation to protect vulnerable underseas cables that are the backbone of the global telecommunications that dominate all aspects of our economic, political, and sociocultural lives. These incisive pieces high-

light that the *geo* in geopolitics now goes beyond the steppes and mountains, sea-lanes and harbors that Mackinder and Mahan focused on, to planetary commons and even areas not defined by their physical attributes, such as the internet. Arguably, satellites—located hundreds of miles above a rotating Earth—have determined the outcome of recent conflicts more than traditional weapons such as tanks and planes.

Even the articles looking at threats that have been with us for some time—Eric Brewer on Iran and Benjamin R. Young on North Korea—highlight how our concern with these countries has less to do with where they are located on the globe, or their own desire for land and empire, and instead with their quest for nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated ways of delivering them. Indeed, the nuclear revolution—and equally, the ballistic missile revolution—is one of the key drivers of the changing nature of the *geo* in geopolitics. The potential of states like North Korea and Iran—who possess little ability to project traditional military power or acquire empire abroad—to someday visit catastrophic ruin most anywhere in the world in hours, if not minutes, highlights how nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles alter how we think of space and time in conflict. Making the nuclear challenge even more unnerving is how difficult it is to know, *ex ante*, when and under what circumstances a state and its leaders will decide to use these fearsome weapons. Atomic weapons have only been used against an adversary twice, by the United States against Japan, within days of each other in August 1945. We are still learning new things about that fateful decision.³ The “bomb” is not like tanks or planes, where counting the total number of weapons

1 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Vintage Books, 1987).

2 Hal Brands, *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2025).

3 Alex Wellerstein, *The Most Awful Responsibility: Truman and the Secret Struggle for Control of the Nuclear Age* (HarperCollins, 2025).

and assessing their capabilities gives you a good sense of the balance of military power and which countries are more threatening and which are less so. Whether and under what circumstances you would or would not use nuclear weapons matters as much, if not more, than how many you have or what their quality is. As Paul Slovic, Missy Peterson, Rose McDermott, Daniel R. Post, and Daniel Västfjäll reveal, manipulable cognitive biases affect how likely people are to support nuclear strikes and under what circumstances. This is worrying. Few recall the terrifying effects that nuclear weapons had on world politics during the Cold War, and the rise of loose nuclear talk in recent years is a cause for great concern. Yet the presence of the bomb hovers over international relations like a malevolent ghost, usually quiet and invisible yet always inspiring fear, and in danger of emerging in terrifying, murderous ways without warning.

Does that mean geography, traditionally understood, no longer matters as we try to understand international relations? Of course not. Iran has responded to the attack from Israel and the United States by threatening shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, reducing the supply of oil available to the world and driving up prices. The physical characteristics and vulnerability of the strait matter enormously in a way that would have been familiar to strategists from a previous era. Visit the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, or spend time in Kashmir, and the sharp, dangerous reality of conflicts over who controls what territory is palpable. Arguably, the conflict that is most likely to initiate a third world war—who physically controls Taiwan—is driven at least in part by traditional geopolitics.

Place matters in another, less material way. I have argued that the fiercest contemporary battlefield, created by Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, is a puzzle from a traditional lens of realism and material interest. Controlling the coal, wheat, and supplicant population of the Donbass generated geopolitical power in 1900, but few think it does today.⁴ Yet Russia still grinds on in a costly war of attrition, sapping its power, largely because President Putin believes Ukraine "belongs" to Russia. It is a reminder that even in a globalized world—where most of the day-to-day existence in much of the world is shaped by a "cloud" that physically exists both everywhere and nowhere—geographical location still matters.

The meaning of geography, or place, goes well beyond its traditional economic or strategic dimensions. People care deeply about where they are from and how that shapes who they are and what is most important to them. There is a word in German, *Heimat*, that describes a homeland and the feeling of belonging to a particular place—a sense of rootedness and integration with the physical spaces around us that gives meaning and purpose to people's lives. There is a dark side to this, of course—the "blood and soil" version that fuels hypernationalism and war and continues to drive conflict.⁵ There is also a positive side to these feelings: People derive meaning and purpose from a specific place, including its physical features, which shape the language, traditions, and practices that create a shared identity, the sense of home, and all the warmth that a more positive version of homeland connotes.

Which brings me, in an unexpected way, to the state of Texas. Anyone who has lived in Texas, or interacted with a Texan, knows the fierce sense of pride and loyalty they feel to the Lone Star State. With due apologies to my friends who live there, however, it is not the physical beauty, easy geographical characteristics, or mild weather that make it special; spend a summer in Austin or any time of year in Amarillo and you will likely be cured of any romance for the climate or landscape. It is the people who are special: bigger, bolder, more open, and in the spirit of the best aspects of *Heimat*, deeply proud of their connection to the state; indeed, it may be the unforgiving geography and climate of Texas that produces such memorable characters. Unlike other, more distressing forms of *Heimat*, the state can be unusually welcoming to newcomers. My second favorite Lone Star bumper sticker—after "Texas: Bigger than France"—is "I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could."

Why do I mention this? As I get older, I grow more sentimental. My thirteen years (2000–2013) at the University of Texas were some of the happiest in my life. My daughters were born in Texas; one is a proud Longhorn graduate while the other starts on the Forty Acres this fall. As a new academic, I was lucky to be mentored and befriended by extraordinary Texans, many of whom are no longer here and I miss terribly: Walt Rostow, LBJ's national security advisor, and his extraordinary partner, the true power in the relationship, Elspeth;⁶ Harry

4 Francis J. Gavin, *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era* (International Institute for Strategic Studies / Routledge, 2024).

5 The dilemma of *Heimat*—its ability to generate social belonging but also drive dark, aggressive actions, can be seen in the work, life, and choices of controversial German philosopher Martin Heidegger. See Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

6 "A Tribute to Elspeth Davies Rostow." The Strauss Center for International Security and Law, January 3, 2008, <https://www.strausscenter.org/news/a-tribute-to-elspeth-davies-rostow/>.

Middleton, who for decades ran the best presidential library in the US National Archives system;⁷ Tom Staley, a James Joyce scholar, former minor league baseball player, and academic hustler (in the best sense of the word) who built the Harry Ransom Center into a world-renowned institution;⁸ Hans Mark⁹ and Roy Schwitters,¹⁰ celebrated engineer and scientist, who made time for a young historian with almost no technical capabilities; and Bill Powers, the most dynamic, innovative university president I ever met.¹¹ The list could go on and on—fortunately, my most treasured mentors, Jim Langdon and Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, are still energetically engaging and improving the world. I cannot think of another university where such luminaries would make time for, let alone mentor, a green assistant professor. Nor another university that would encourage an upstart like me to work with others to help create the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law and the Clements Center for National Security—and star in a video honoring the coach of the 2005 NCAA Football championship.¹² The thing I am most proud of from my time at Texas was convincing the extraordinary scholar, policymaker, and all-around great human being, Will Inboden, to make Austin his home. That he now helps run the place as provost fills me with immeasurable pride and happiness; I cannot imagine a better fit between a visionary academic leader and an innovative, ambitious campus.

It was the University of Texas and the University of Texas System that possessed the vision and wisdom to start this journal and provide generous support to this day, encouraged by then-Chancellor (and current LBJ School professor) Bill McRaven. While I am far from objective, I believe the *Texas National Security Review* has become the world's best outlet for serious, accessible, policy-relevant, interdisciplinary scholarship on national and international security. This success would not be possible without the strong, forward-looking leadership of Adam Klein, Admiral Joe Maguire, and Paul Edgar of the Strauss and Clements Center, with the support of their extraordinary staff. The University of Texas Press does an incredible job of producing the journal and we have the best associate editors

in the business. Special praise is owed the dynamic duo of Sheena Chestnut Greitens, editor in chief par excellence, and executive editor, Ryan Vest. Sheena took the helm at the journal during a time of unexpected challenge and transition, and she has navigated the journal to even higher excellence with her remarkable intellect, tenacity, and grace.

The journal is entering its tenth year, and while there may be less to be happy about on the subjects we cover—the state of world politics and international relations—I would like to take a moment to celebrate what *TNSR* has accomplished over the past decade. And, for curious readers around the globe, to explain why we are so proud of the *Texas* in *Texas National Security Review*. I am convinced the journal's success is in great measure due to the unique qualities of the impressive state, its university and university system, its unparalleled collection of creative, bold leaders, and its *Heimat*. I no longer live in Texas, and my longtime readers will know my irascible persona is defined by my Philadelphia roots and its long-suffering sports franchises. In many ways, however, my heart—and my sense of place, my *Heimat*—will always belong to Texas. And perhaps dear reader, wherever you are, you too will imbibe a bit of that Longhorn spirit, as you read another excellent edition of *TNSR*. Hook 'em!

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Image: *Texas Capitol, Austin scenes by The University of Texas at Austin.*¹³

7 Paul Burka, "The Man Who Saved LBJ," *Texas Monthly*, August 2000, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/the-man-who-saved-lbj/>.

8 D. T. Max, "Final Destination: Why Do the Archives of So Many Great Writers End Up in Texas?," *The New Yorker*, June 4, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/06/11/final-destination>.

9 "Hans Micheal Mark (1929–2021)," <https://www.ae.utexas.edu/people/faculty/faculty-memorials/hans-m-mark>.

10 Marc Airhart, "Remembering High-Energy Physicist Roy Schwitters," January 18, 2023, <https://cns.utexas.edu/news/announcements/remembering-high-energy-physicist-roy-schwitters>.

11 Francis J. Gavin, "Why UT President Powers Is the Best at What He Does," *The Dallas Morning News*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2014/07/08/francis-gavin-why-ut-president-powers-is-the-best-at-what-he-does/>.

12 "Mack Brown Chair," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUX7W9iSLi8>.

13 For the image, see <https://utexas.imagerelay.com/share/a1d47362f85c45c88e62b2bb3cc526b9>.