



Geopolitics: Into the Future

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Abstract

The extension of geopolitics into Space poses countless challenges that transform traditional notions of bilateral and multilateral relations between and among states. This article explores the workings of the international system under the stresses of an unprecedented broadening of political horizons, as the last remnants of the old post-Cold War order fade away.

The extension of geopolitics into Space began with rockets able to move out of the Earth's atmosphere. This extension was crystallised by the apparent possibilities offered by a presence in Space, notably for surveillance and weaponry, and by the prospect of the extraction of minerals. Thus, in 2022, a lunar test mission discovered Changesite-(Y), a new phosphate mineral that could be used as fuel for nuclear fusion. The composition of the Moon indeed includes large amounts of alumina, iron, magnesia and titanium. This potential helped make Space warfare of immediate interest, as did the drive to protect and threaten surveillance and communications capabilities. Dedicated Space Command branches of the military have been or are being established by a number of states including America, Australia, Britain, France and Germany.

The role of satellites was highlighted in the Ukraine war with Russian hacking attempts thwarted by the provision of American satellite assis-

tance to the Ukrainian military. A key role was played by Elon Musk through his Space X's Starlink. By mid-2023, Musk had over 3,500 satellites in orbit, thus providing mass of a new form. In turn, Russia tested electronic warfare systems aimed at American satellites, notably by jamming them, but also by the potential use of anti-satellite missiles able to hit targets orbiting at 17,500 miles per hour, which, moreover, would produce debris able to damage other satellites, as with a test in 2021 when a defunct Soviet satellite, Cosmos 1408, was destroyed. America, China and India all also have anti-satellite weaponry.

Developing technology, in this case in the shape of satellites and anti-satellite weaponry, poses problems for thinking about and depicting geopolitics, including the continual potency of particular geographical elements as well as the opportunities provided by these developments. The most obvious problems militarily arise in protecting the very systems that offer opportunities, but there are also the issues involved not only in using information but also in understanding the relevant issues and appropriate processes. All of these have been the case throughout the practice of geopolitics, at whatever the level, but the speed of development now poses difficulties.

The deployment, use and protection of relevant material in an appropriate time sequence has always been an issue for understanding spatial relationships in capability and, more particularly, conflict. At present, real-time mapping means not the hasty assimilation of visual reconnaissance by an observer in the field, but the closure of the gap between surveillance, decision and firing system, as automated processes and digital location are employed. However, the prospect of such mapping being affected by attacks on communication systems, whether satellites or computers, threatens to plunge opponents into a cartographic, indeed information, void. Thus, the very enhanced capability that appeared to stem from cartographic improvement and application also threatened a vulnerability that was far greater in air reconnaissance assets in the two World Wars and the Cold War.

Geographical information can be provided now from drones and, locally, micro-drones. These and other technological changes, past, present and future, can offer an enhanced possibility for the implementation of a geopolitics, with the latter understood as a politics present in spatial terms and explained through it. It is difficult, however, to assess how cyber capabilities will affect geopolitics, not least as they appear to have

the ability to overcome distance. At the same time, these capabilities cannot provide for the occupation of territory. Moreover, their kinetic possibilities are very limited.

Politics take on energy by exposition and discussion. In this, it is difficult to know what the building blocks of rhetorical geopolitics will be in the future, what in short will replace «Munich», «Suez», «Cuba», «Vietnam», «Iraq», «Afghanistan», and others. Clearly, the references will vary by state, as has hitherto been the case. Particular goals can be sought with the use of geopolitical arguments, as in July 2023 when President Nauseda of Lithuania pressed for permanent NATO defensive bases near Russia's eastern borders, in place of a 1997 treaty with Russia prohibiting them under «current security circumstances», on the grounds, he argued, that Russian policy had essentially destroyed the agreement. In a guest article appearing in the «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung» on July 10, Nauseda argued that a successful Russian advance would expose Germany, as in 1760, 1920 and 1945. The last, when Hitler was overthrown, was not the happiest of comparisons.

The use of historical examples may be less defined by a duality than was the case, at least in theory, during the Cold War. Indeed, the international reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine proved salutary to the West in this respect because many more states sought neutrality than had been anticipated. Moreover, the geopolitical markers were not those sought by Western commentators. Thus, on the pattern of Cold War exchanges, American criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine were frequently met in «non-aligned countries», such as South Africa, by reference to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This comparison indicated the simultaneity of the rhetoric of geopolitics, as well as its unfixed nature in terms of the place of reference. The future will therefore create a new present (and past). The political resentments of the «Global South» include what was presented as unfairness, even exploitation, by Western governments and companies in the response to the Covid pandemic.

Moreover, the perceptions bound up in geopolitics are inherently in a state of flux, and to a degree that clashes markedly with the language about fixity of interests – «geography as destiny» – that is so frequently deployed. This observation might appear to represent a critique of «the public», but perceptions are also at play for political actors and military planners. In part, this is an obvious consequence of the range of activity

that has to be engaged. Thus, what geopolitics means in the context of «triphibious» warfare and «cross-domain synergy» is not immediately apparent. Political actors are more generally involved in a situation in which major uncertainty is inherent in decision-making. Yet again, this is an instructive contrast to the apparent fixity of geopolitics. Indeed, commentators in 2023 felt able to counterpoint particular geopolitical interpretations from the past when discussing the present situation, while also employing the resonant vocabulary of the subject. A sense of the immediate present taking precedence, which was the opposite of the standard interpretation of geopolitics, was captured by the distinguished historian Niall Ferguson in his «Bloomberg» column of July 2, 2023, one in which geopolitics was presented in a diachronic fashion:

Today's geopolitics and economics have more in common with the 17th century than the 20th [...]. What is the wider significance of the crisis in Russia? Two weeks ago, I warned that the geopolitics of Cold War seemed to be pitting Halford J. Mackinder's vast Eurasian «Heartland» against Nicholas J. Spykman's «Rimland». If the Heartland consists of a new «Axis» of China, Russia and Iran, the Rimland is the coalition the US has formed with its European and Asian allies to support Ukraine. But I worried that the Rimland was showing signs of division. The Prigozhin mutiny seems to have proved them right. Maybe it's the Heartland, not the Rimland, that is cracking up¹.

Aside from the continuity of terms, which is a characteristic of the use of geopolitical arguments, it is striking how far the standard geographical focus on Eurasia continues to leave out much of the world, more particularly Africa and South America². This relates both to the discussion of them and to the geopolitical arguments advanced. There could be a highly explicit linkage between events and discussion, as with Augusto Pinochet, military dictator of Chile in 1973-90, who had been professor of geopolitics and sub-director at the Chilean War Academy when he published *Geopolítica* (1968). This drew on a tradition of interest in the subject with Pinochet succeeding to the Chair held by General Gregorio Rodríguez Tascón who worked on geopolitics. Such work, however, does not tend to be incorporated into the set intellectual pedigree, cast and

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-07-02/russia-s-farcical-mutiny-is-deadly-serious-for-iran-china-niall-ferguson>

² Though see K. Dodds, *Geopolitics and the Geographical Imagination of Argentina*, in D. Atkinson, K. Dodds (eds.), *Geopolitical Traditions. Critical Histories of a Century of Geopolitical Thought*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, pp. 150-184.

agenda of geopolitics; which, in this respect, is similar to strategy having such a restriction.

The content and character of strategic thought in Africa deserves even more attention as, with Asia, it is the continent that has seen the most conflict since World War Two. How far, and how, that conflict is understood in geopolitical terms by African leaders deserves far more attention than it receives at a time of the standard subject *menage à trois* of America, China and Russia. In particular, challenges in Africa that cross state boundaries, such as that of fundamentalist Islam in the *sahel* belt south of the Sahara, deserve consideration, but in more specific terms than “war between civilisations”. For example, the conflicts in the Horn of Africa, and involving the states from Sudan to Congo and their neighbours, exemplify the process of “the foe of my foe is my friend”, which is an essential form of geopolitical thought when it has a spatial setting.

Environmental considerations will affect the geopolitics of the future. Yet, far from this being a clearcut process, there will be a series of developments, some at cross-purposes. Moreover, “ownership” of the relevant geopolitics will vary greatly, depending on which group is being considered: the geopolitics of environmental change will vary not only by country but also by the group surveyed.

The relevant environment includes that of military technology, but here again there will be variety. Thus, in terms of the application of AI to bulk-data analysis, major powers will be able to apply their systems to identify targets, and this will give them enhanced capability, and notably so in conjunction with hypersonic missiles. America and China will probably be best able to direct resources to that end, for example in tracking and targeting hostile submarines. However, while very valuable at the operational level, AI will not provide a strategic tool capable of replacing established attributes of political and military leadership at that level. Furthermore, the operational effectiveness of AI will be greater in certain *milieux* and for particular weapons systems than for others. In particular, it will be more effective at sea where there are a finite number of targets, rather than on land where conflict in cities is a particular problem. Large maritime targets, such as aircraft carriers, will be especially vulnerable. Indeed, it will probably be most appropriate to put maritime targets such as maritime aircraft in protected harbours rather than at sea. However, as with most aspects of present and future geopolitics, it will only be possible to establish the nature of this capability under the shock of conflict,

and the risk, uncertainty and depreciation it entails. This not only makes prediction difficult, but also extrapolating from one episode to another. There are also psychological assumptions bound up in weapon systems choices, as with the continued preference for manned flight and to a degree that reflects historical ideas about masculinity rather than the practicality of using unmanned flight in many contexts, or, rather, with the manned component at the level of distant control.

The ability and willingness of major powers to invest in full-spectrum capabilities will also vary. For America, the danger emerges more clearly because China is and will be more powerful in economic terms and able to react more speedily to developments and possibilities than was the Soviet Union. Thus, Chinese shipbuilding capacity is far far greater than that of America, allegedly by July 2023 about 232 times greater according to the Office of Naval Intelligence³. The Soviet Union, in contrast, proved especially poor in adapting to the new technological possibilities of the 1980s, notably the spread of information systems and the greater use of computers. In turn, Chinese adaptability appears to some also to be more speedy in comparison with America, and not least because in America there is greater emphasis on living standards and social welfare expenditure, while taxation is relatively low. Again, geopolitics have to take note of politics.

Whether America can compete, as claimed, by virtue of the innovative range permitted by limited central control is unclear, however much it accords with Western ideological ideas, not least because there is the issue of applying this range to military procurement and deployment. How far this will or should lead to «America First» policies in place of collective defence is unclear. There is the argument that to do so reduces risk and expense for America, and increases autonomy⁴. There is also the problem that if, following the precepts of Donald Trump and lessening or abandoning commitments to allies, the latter, in turn, will also become more transactional in their relations. This weakens America's ability to portray itself as in geopolitical control of a unified bloc. As a result, a balance of power politics is harder to pursue. Transactional relations also put a pressure on the wider economic interchange that brings significant systemic benefit.

³ J. Trevithick, The Drive, <https://www.thedrive.com>, published July 11, 2022.

⁴ E.A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT 2021.

Looking to the future may involve «blue-skies» outcomes in the shape of a «black skies» nothingness. However, the possibility of a disastrous interaction with an extra-solar element, may be one that causes environmental cataclysm and/or disease; or, alternatively, a more focused hostility, is currently in the field of fiction, rather as was the equivalent of atomic power for example in Agatha Christie's *The Big Four* (1927). This, nevertheless, presents the chance of a geopolitics influenced, even determined, by very different forces to those employed hitherto. Geopolitical models tend to use rational explanations of interests and goals; but the rationality in question may be very different, indeed, to borrow the phrase by Samuel Huntington, one of the form of a clash of civilisations. In this, as in other cases, motivating drives can be treated as rational; but the rationality may be that of a Darwinian body needing fulfilment in organic terms rather than a cerebral mind. What will geopolitics mean for robots?

To move from Outer Space in an unclear timespan, to the Earth in the near future, may appear mundane, but is a reminder of the degree to which it is foolish to assume any particular direction of flow or priority in the formulation and discussion of geopolitics. This is more generally the case given the problem posed by the failure to make explicit this point, and, indeed, similar conceptual and methodological issues.

The Earth today is, as with all other todays, a moment in time between past and future, and the latter is inevitably included within the planning and speculation of the present. Unsurprisingly, there is much that is well-established in both. Indeed, whether in terms of the prospect of rivalry between China and Russia, the potential impact of rocketry, and the choices that may be made by the «Global South», we are essentially still in the continuity of a period that really began in the 1950s and was brought to the fore in the (late) 1960s, in part with the relative decline of Western power.

The emphasis to be placed on each element, however, varies, as does its interactive character. Thus, in the early 1970s, as it proved difficult for America to extricate itself from the Vietnam commitment and contain the consequences of failure, so the crisis in Chinese-Soviet relations provided fundamental opportunities for the Nixon government. More notably, these opportunities were sustained by its successors until the 1990s, the loss then of the political alignment proving a major mistake for

America, but not for a China that no longer required a security guarantee against Russia.

In the early 2020s, there appears to be no such possibility as Russian and Chinese expansionism are both opposed by America. Yet, that leaves unclear both the possible consequences of political and economic tensions, if not rivalry, between China and Russia, and the possibilities of a change in American policy after an election, or indeed a modulation or variation in it beforehand. As Gerald Baker observed in the [London] «Times» on July 13, 2023: «As their own relative economic and strategic power has waned in the 21st century, fewer Americans see why they should continue to bear a burden of global leadership that seems like the legacy of a different era of geopolitics». Indeed, on July 13, President Biden faced questioning in Helsinki about the constancy of American policy. One journalist asked: «What actions will you take to assure Finland that the US will remain a reliable NATO partner for decades to come?». Sauli Niinistö, the Finnish President, was asked in the same press conference if he was «worried that the political instability in the US will cause issues in the alliance in the future». Biden had raised doubts by pointing out: «No one can guarantee the future. But this is the best bet anyone can make».

Indeed, the concerns about the 2022 Midterms and then with reference to a possible Trump victory, concerns voiced in 2022-24 by European and Japanese commentators, were not only an expression of anxiety about American consistency and purpose but also, at least implicitly, a critique of geopolitics as a description of what is, as opposed to a rhetoric of what ought to be. The idea of a European Union foreign policy and thus geopolitics very much appeared to be a case of the latter.

Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin share an existential challenge to geopolitical assumptions based on a rules-based system in which, despite criticisms of them, Western values, national independence, human rights, and democratic practices are all linked, at least as desirable factors. The degree to which this ideological affinity trumps elements in which China and Russia clash is open to discussion. There is no room for a conclusive statement on the matter, and suggestions to the contrary are foolish. Any emphasis above on the shared values of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin underline the extent to which geography is scarcely destiny but instead refracted through a multivalent situation.

As a separate point, the idea of a Eurasian geopolitical bloc dominated by authoritarian states becomes more complex under scrutiny, for China, which is definitely authoritarian, centres its power on areas in or near the coastal littoral. As a result, it can be presented as part of a «Rimland» seeking, on a longstanding pattern, to dominate the interior and notably making efforts to do so in Tibet and Xinjiang. Yet again, this underlines the flexibility, indeed porosity, of the terms employed. They are, however, well-established. Thus, Xi Jinping, who visited Papua New Guinea when it hosted the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation conference, told James Marape, the Prime Minister: «China stays committed to equal treatment, mutual respect, win-win co-operation, openness and inclusiveness, without targeting any third party. It has no interest in geopolitical rivalry».

This is an instance of the use of the term geopolitical as describing an undesirable practice, in this case rivalry. There is an echo back to the process by which revolutionary regimes, for example those of the French (1789) and Russian (1917) revolutionaries, were apt to reject the supposed goals, practices and language of the pre-revolutionary governments in international relations. However, typecasting the rhetoric does not mean that the new regimes did not soon follow similar goals and practices, even if the language changed. Moreover, deploring geopolitics, a process also seen after World War Two in reaction, notably in America, to Haushofer and the Nazi use of geopolitical ideas⁵, did not prevent its widespread employment by many commentators as a shorthand for all geographical relations with politics.

Alongside the idea of a geopolitical bloc, much can be made about the disparities in population terms east of the Urals, and this can be presented as a geopolitical vulnerability for Russia. The Russian annexation of Chinese territory in 1858-60 in the Amur Valley and the Russian Far East can be seen as a geopolitical grievance that, like most, has an historical origin. Clashing economic interests over the exploitation of Russian resources, especially in Siberia, can be seen as a grievance in the making.

All of these factors provided the potential for playing on Russian anger or concern toward China, and/or for Russia holding a position of choice between America and China. The invasion of Ukraine lost Russia that possible geopolitical resource/reserve. Yet, however, much this might

⁵ D. Whittlesey, H.W. Weigert, *Geopolitics*, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 10, University of Chicago, Chicago IL 1963, p. 182.

seem implausible at present, and notably from the perspective of a Eastern Europe angry and fearful about Russia, there is the chance of a change.

There is a good historical example. In 1950-53, Chinese forces fought the Americans in Korea, and in 1962 America deployed units to threaten China when it attacked India. Yet, a decade later, the two powers began an alignment. It is easier for authoritarian powers to make such changes, as shown by the 1939-41 German-Soviet alliance. In turn, the Japanese attack on America led America and the Soviet Union to be on the same side in 1941-45.

Such a process might be spurred by future American government more concerned about China, and happy to delegate regional relations with Russia to Europe while itself seeking to weaken China by pursuing better relations with Russia. This approach does not necessarily augur well for relations between America and Europe's Russian neighbours, notably those that have been most determined to support Ukraine, a group that also includes Britain.

The America-China-Russia relationship(s) dominates attention at present, but that leaves in the shadows the geopolitical concerns of most states. Moreover, a failure to engage with the latter can help ensure that there is an inability to understand why particular responses are adopted to the great power rivalries. The rivalries of "lesser" states are more complex because they also have to consider their response to the major states. The degree to which geography plays a role here is pushed to the fore by the issue of propinquity, as that poses the issue of border instability. Weapons range, however, as with Iran and Israel, can make propinquity far more extensive than the bordering territory that attracted prime attention in the past⁶.

From this perspective, geopolitics has become truly global, just as geoeconomics has with the ready ability to move money. The need for a new language to conceptualise a geopolitics of such a range is readily apparent. In contrast, it is at the sub-national scale where such weaponry is absent or less significant that geopolitics as often understood may be more valuable. In particular, any emphasis on ethnic rivalry as in Congo or South Sudan, and on foreign intervention across borders, may well

⁶ E. Eilam, *Containment in the Middle East*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE 2019.

mean that issues of location are of particular significance⁷. Again there is the question of how best to reconcile the sub-national and the global. Looking to the future, it is likely that countries will move away from the standard list of geopolitical topics. The challenge for geopolitical conceptualisation and application remains a struggle over meaning and application.

⁷ J. Stearns, *The War that Doesn't Say Its Name. Unending Conflict in the Congo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2021.