

Methodological Challenges toward Constructing a Geopolitical Model

By

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Introduction

Despite its usage in the media, and occasionally within academic writings, the term, “geopolitics,” normally is denigrated for its past associations with disreputable and discredited theories and ideologies. In only the rarest of instances has the term been raised to respectability and utility, although recently, geopolitics has gained some ground toward a modest legitimacy. The ambition of this article is to restore the concept to a higher respectability by constructing a classical geopolitical model that may clarify its approach and show its utility.

In taking this path of construction, I encounter certain methodological challenges that I attempt to resolve in the pages that follow. These challenges will revolve primarily around questions that relate to the selecting and applying of theories that would fit a classical geopolitical definition.

General definition of the classical geopolitical model

As a simple definition, classical geopolitics reflects the thesis that the positions of states, regions, and resources can impact upon states’ foreign-affairs actions and policies. In geopolitics, we assume that one’s environment may condition one’s behavior. And raised to a higher level, we assume the geographic placement of a country, likewise, may condition its regional and international involvement.

I attach the *classical* label here to separate my traditional geopolitics from the post-modern “critical geopolitics,” the latter differing quite extensively from the former (see Kelly 2006). The traditional emphasizes the gathering and applying of neutral and interpretive theory; the critical focuses upon deconstructing alleged exploitation, with theory largely ignored.

A *model* denotes a container for theories that correspond to the definition of a particular international-relations approach, in the current case, to geopolitics. The importance of this study lies with the collection and application of relevant theories,

heartlands, shatterbelts, checkerboards, sea and land power, buffer states, distance and location, among many, that are assembled within my geopolitical model.

Examples of theories that fit the geopolitical definition and that will enter the geopolitical model

A *theory* is merely a simple sentence of probability. If “A” happens, it is somewhat likely that “B” also happen. For instance, *the more borders a country possesses [A], the more war involvements that county may suffer [B]*. I approach the selection of possible theories *objectively*, that is, premises taken from historic examples, common sense and logic, maps and pivotal locations, statistical testing, rationality, and scholars and states- persons’ views and practices, all of which will adhere to the classical geopolitical definition. The objective categories above represent my methodology for choosing theories. Several prominent theory examples follow:

- Heartland – a rather isolated region centrally located within a continent, distant from sea coasts but united by river watersheds and other topographical features. Its advantage stems from its isolation and distance from possible invaders and from its pivotal ability to expand outwardly from a central location. Halford Mackinder’s version of the Eurasian heartland represents the most famous of theories in the classical mold.
- Checkerboards – a leap-frogging configuration also of a region, where a state’s neighbor is an enemy, but the neighbor of that neighbor is a friend. This *mandala* structure was seen in ancient Greece and now in contemporary South America.
- Shatterbelts – a region showing two levels of conflict: (1) a strategic conflict between outside great powers and (2) a local conflict among countries of that region. A shatterbelt arises when the opposing strategic nations enter into separate alliances with opposing regional nations. The Cuban Missile Crisis offers a good example of this theory. None appear at the present moment.
- Contagion – a spread of certain phenomena across international frontiers, i.e., revolutions and coups, democracy, riots, and economic depressions, for instance.

To date, I have assembled more than sixty (60) such theories that follow the classical geopolitical definition, and accordingly, they all will filter into my geopolitical model.

Common criticisms of geopolitics

The concept has suffered much abuse. For instance, Charles Clover (1999: 9) stated: “Few modern ideologies are as whimsically all-encompassing, as romantically obscure, as intellectually sloppy, and as likely to start a third world war as the theory of geopolitics.” Whereas Christopher Fettweis (2000: 69) described the evolution of geopolitical thought, linking its impact upon foreign policies and upon states-persons, he yet urged “[d]ebunking the fundamental assumptions of geopolitics” as an “important task” for ridding these “outdated theories.” Another claim against our concept comes in it being “deterministic,” or the ideal that everything is caused by environmental features. Lastly, Gearoid O Tuathail (1999: 108), a post-modernist advocate of “critical geopolitics,” contributed this depiction: “As an unreflexively Eurocentric and narrowly rational cultural practice of ‘experts’ in powerful Western institutions (from universities to military bureaucracies to strategic ‘think-tanks’) [classical] geopolitics is not about power politics: it is power politics.” I argue against all of these criticisms.

My defense against such allegations rests upon these two assumptions: (1) that our environments can exert some impact upon our actions and behaviors, and likewise, these same sensitivities can emerge within countries’ foreign affairs; and 2) that the tie between foreign policies and actions and the historic theories of geopolitics, at least to a certain degree, show some connection.

I submit this description as example (theories in italics): the impact of the *Eurasian Heartland* directed U.S. Cold-War *containment* policies in which North America faced the world as a dominant *naval power*, able to thrust its power upon Asian and European *rimland enclaves* so as to assure favorable *balances* among states for securing its protection. North America is further protected for reasons of *distance* from *Eurasia*, of stable *frontiers* with neighbors, and of *ample resources* within its hemisphere. America both *encircles* Eurasia and is encircled by this Grand Continent. The *Monroe Doctrine* protects our nation from threatening *shatterbelts* in *Middle America*, and the U.S. much prefers the area as its *influence sphere*.

Further, the *global pivot* appears to have moved from Halford Mackinder’s original *heartland* of Central Eurasia eastward to East Asia, and several commentators (Brzezinski 2012; Grygiel 2006) have recommended to our leaders an active U.S. involvement in the area, establishing a favorable *balance of power* or an *off-shore balancing* that would *encircle* China, discouraging it from aggressive actions. It appears the Obama foreign policy follows this direction at present.

The italicized concepts depict traditional theories that correspond to the spatial definition of geopolitics, many of which have been recognized and utilized by leaders of states for centuries. These theories inherently come as geopolitical, and others of similar note could be drawn along these lines as well. In sum, my evidence to substantiate the value of geopolitics comes in the recognition of the usefulness to ministers and to scholars of such theories within the definition of geopolitics.

So, why the refusal to recognize in traditional geopolitics a foreign-policy facility so frequently enlisted by most countries, but seldom legitimized by name in their international relationships? One prominent reason might extend to certain harmful “sciences” or ideologies that have attached themselves to traditional geopolitics, contributing to its pejorative reputation. Among these infections: the Machiavellian, Social Darwinism, National Socialist, Falling-Dominoes Containment, and post-modern depictions. More generally, too, the term itself, “geo-politics,” suggests a rather romantic and distinctive image, perhaps a magnet attracting alien and harmful attachments, and one that other theories (realism, functionalism, dependency, world systems, and constructivism) seem to have been able to avoid. Lacking a clear and agreed-upon definition may also have weakened geopolitics.

The challenge of shifting this negative geopolitical image to a contemporary legitimacy has engaged part of my scholarly attention, and certain methodological routes I have taken require, I think, some further debate and refinement still. Accordingly, my desire is to expose the challenges relative to methodology to the reader as being the primary purpose of this article.

Defining a model and a theory

I imagine a *model* as a simple and passive container of assumptions, concepts, and theories, the three aspects all conforming to a set definition. That definition establishes the ability for these elements to filter into the container model. Or, said differently, a model figures as a “basket,” the definition of which will establish the walls or bounds for the relevant features to be assembled within. A theory that fits the geopolitical definition will become part of the geopolitical model, whereas theories of fascist, realist, or Cold-War modes cannot enter our geopolitical model because they do not correspond to the geopolitical parameters. Instead, they must locate themselves within their own respective models.

To date, I have collected over sixty concepts/theories that I label as geopolitically-related, and therefore, each, so defined, have been placed within my geopolitical model. In the manuscript I am preparing for eventual publication, I have

applied most of these theories to an assortment of historic events, hoping to shed some interpretative light upon such events.

Below, thirteen challenges toward my methodology await, and my responses to these. Such an involvement will form the remainder of this discussion.

Thirteen methodological and theoretical challenges

(1) Model vs. theory. I believe I reside on somewhat original turf in the above descriptions of separating *model* from *theory*. For instance, the realist theorist, Michael Mastanduno, wrote the following description about his subject (1997:50 – my italics):

“It is critical to stress at the outset that *there is no single “theory of realism”* and that realism *per se* cannot be tested, confirmed, or refuted. Realism is a research program that contains a core set of assumptions from which a variety of theories and explanations can be developed.”

My stance, mostly in agreement with Mastanduno, finds fault only in his assertion of “no *single theory of realism.*” In my terminology, he confuses a realist theory, *which does not exist*, with a realist model, *which does exist*. Or, in my own focus, *no geopolitical theory exists*. Instead, solely one geopolitical model is present, with a variety of associated theories defined as spatial that would be a part of that model. Accordingly, *theories* reside within a *model*; *the two differ in description and function*. Stated once more, *shatterbelt* and *heartland* theories fit within a geopolitical model.

Several authors have approximated my stance on *models vs. theories*, yet they have taken more limited paths within the realm of geopolitics. One example comes with Jakub Grygiel (2006: x), who set within his geopolitical model just three variables or theories – “location of natural and economic resources and the lines of communication linking them” in addition to peaceful or threatened frontiers. He then applied these traits to finding causes for the rise-and-falls of three great states, Venice, the Ottoman Empire, and Ming China. I rate his approach as similar to mine, except that I have assembled vastly more variables, or theories, within my model than he has, and my ambitions have lain with attempting more examples for application.

Unlike Grygiel, Saul Cohen (2009) gathered an assortment of theories pertaining to a geopolitical model, and he associated these also with developmental and systems models. But, surprisingly and unfortunately, he failed to apply any of his theories to further an interpretation of current foreign policies and actions, resting instead with making general descriptions of world politics devoid of any connection to his geopolitical and other models.

I differ from these others in that I am gathering a larger assembly of classical theories into a consistent geopolitical model for use in interpreting certain historical foreign-policy events and policies.

(2) The model itself. This model is an exclusive gathering of elements that correspond to a relevant definition. The model's definition poses as an "entry gate" for concepts-theories that correspond to that definition. A geographic or spatial feature shown in a generalization will probably gain its passage into the geopolitical model. But a characteristic of "power" will fail such an entry because it fails the geopolitical definition, yet perhaps it will gain acceptance to a realist model, "power" being more fitting to the realist definition. And to emphasize this once more, only one geopolitical model exists, being a platform for a variety of geopolitically-defined theories. In sum, nothing else happens within the model itself.

Concepts and *assumptions* inhabit the model, also. Concepts are passive vocabularies within the definition; they describe its distinguishing attributes. *Shatterbelts*, *heartlands*, *checkerboards*, *land/sea powers*, *contagion*, and the like receive notice in this manner. *Assumptions* rest as the vital bedrocks of a model, features not proven to exist but still necessary to the whole nature of all the rest. In most cases, such assumptions will not yield to objective testing; they simply must be accepted as they are presented. Here, a state's relative *location* is assumed to influence its international performance. Or, a *pivotal heartland* in the midst of Eurasia is assumed to contain advantages for possible world domination. We must trust these to be true; we have no other choice.

(3) Theories as sentences of probability. A *theory* resembles a simple sentence of probability, where if "A" happens, the likelihood of "B" resulting is relatively high, and thus, predictable. Such a generalization is distinguished by its *action*, one action possibly leading to another action, and by its *probability*, a fairly predictable happening linked by a first action as connected to a later result. For instant, a *centrally-positioned* country faces some likelihood of *encirclement* and of *balancing* against it by suspicious neighbors, with certain adjacent *frontiers* threatened. Or, *distance* between countries tends to lessen their common involvement.

(4) Combining concepts and theories. Although defined differently, I have combined these two features into one, *concepts-theories*, primarily for convenience in describing this approach. For if I devoted one section or chapter just to *concepts*, where do I separate concepts from *theories*, a topic for a next section or chapter. As such, where does one end, and the other begin? My decision: simply ignore finding the separation point and join the two, unusually under the label of "theory." Likewise, for

similar reasons, I have chosen to avoid comparing the term *hypothesis*, or “pre-theory,” to the term *theory*, again grouping both as “theory,” thus ignoring the problem of locating the divide between the two.

(5) Selecting and collecting theories. To date, I have gathered over sixty theories within my geopolitical model. My collecting procedure, again, is objective and personal, primarily taken from historic examples, the contributions of scholars, statespersons’ actions, common sense and logic, maps and important geographic locations and positions, and, to a more limited extent, statistical methodology. Quite simply, if a logical generalization appears to hold some link with one or more of my stated indicators, I will add it to my collection.

(6) How to figure “probability” for testing theories. Theories require some evidence of probability. Were my theories all susceptible to testing for statistical “significance,” no problem would follow, as the numbers themselves would offer good evidence of association. Unfortunately, most data linked to spatial attributes comes primarily as qualitative, not quantitative, and thus, numbers will not be available to assist us in the qualitative case. This quotation by Joyce Kaufman (2013: 31) may give some light into my quandary:

“In the field of international relations, it is very difficult to predict with certainty, as there are so many variables than can affect the outcome of events. Unlike the “hard” sciences, where it is possible to work in a lab and control the environment, in the social sciences in general and IR in particular, it is virtually impossible to control any single variable, let alone the interaction among these variables . . . This means that the theoretical perspectives are dynamic and evolve as situations change, as do the variables.”

Yet, she continues by stating that some theories have “emerged that allow us to identify general patterns” that should “give us some indicators of what might happen in the future under similar sets of circumstances.” Here, I would also follow this path.

My solution to this probability-difficulty, too, is an objective one, quite similar to the above quotation. If a predictive-association is recognized within the literature or within policy statements and actions, I will tend to accept it as a *theory*. Or, if a term appears to show a rational, logical, common sense, and spatial tendency, usually set within some event of history or of location, it, too, might be accepted. Thus, my “testing” of a theory comes down to my accepting of a premise that appears, to me, to be logical and probable. I can do no better.

(7) Relevance of a “heartland” or pivotal position. A good example of the above difficulties for locating relevant theories and for testing them under the

geopolitical format would be Halford Mackinder's *heartland* pivot of central Eurasia, a thesis (1904; 1919) in which he predicted the country possessing this vast area would be in a position for world domination. A multitude of authors have debated this controversial premise, favorably or unfavorably. Yet, it could be stated that Mackinder's image has undergirded United States and other states' security strategies since his first argument.

Nonetheless, the *heartland* theory simply does not render to an exact testing for reliability. Acceptance of it as a theory derives from its logic as a strategically-relevant pivotal location, its common reference within the extant literature, and its importance as given it by governors and scholars.

(8) The “scientific” claim. I attribute a “scientific methodology” to classical geopolitics in just one instance, as the statistical or quantitative methodology applied to spatial or geographical influences upon states' foreign behaviors. The problem with this approach is that so little of the data in geopolitics can lend itself to numeric approaches. The “numbers” come but sparsely. How many borders a country possesses does statistically factor with the number of war involvements for each state. I (Kelly 1992) and others have shown a significant statistical relationship within this description. Unfortunately, very little else within geopolitics can render down to numbers.

Certain theories and ideologies of past decades attached to classical geopolitics, some claiming a rigorous thoroughness – Machiavellian realpolitik, the organic and social Darwinian theories of *lebensraum*, fascism, U.S cold-war containment policies, and critical geopolitics of post-modernism. But these doctrines have harmed classical geopolitics with their slanted justifications. Accordingly, I accept my first description, the soundness of statistical significance to geopolitics, but I reject the second description as pejorative and as a harmful infection of past doctrines and ideologies damaging to classical geopolitics.

(9) The threat of determinism. Similar to political geography, geopolitics suffers the past accusations of “determinism,” the premise that geography and environment substantially dictate individuals' and states' actions or inactions. Such rigidity is not my intention; rather, my stance is that geography and environment may *condition* human and foreign-policy outcomes, but they will not control absolutely.

(10) Is a “dynamic” quality lacking? Critics of the classical model assert that geopolitics is “outmoded” and not sufficiently “updated,” and thus, it has lost its usefulness. Contemporary technologies of communication and travel have made geography obsolete, it is claimed. My rebuttal responds that the tools or methods for

interpretation, being theories, do not require change themselves; they remain relatively constant through time. What changes is the *environment itself*, and accordingly, statespersons and scholars must, instead, consider the dynamics of the international system and not the constant geopolitical tools, for interpreting and prescribing the dynamics of foreign-policy dramas.

(11) Separating the realist model from the geopolitical model. One of my research ambitions has been to separate the realist model from the geopolitical model. The two models, at times, appear to overlap, but they clearly spring from different definitions and different assumptions. I much respect realism, and I utilize it in some detail in my teaching. Yet, the two models, realism and geopolitical, diverge and should be distinguished from each other.

Briefly, in my view, realism originates from states seeking security in an anarchic or lawless international system. A *security dilemma* theory shows that heightening one's defenses could actually weaken the nations' safety, as such self-help efforts might prompt instead arms races and threats from neighbors. One solution would come in stable and moderate *power balances*, states either *balancing* or *bandwagoning* for protection. In contrast, geopolitics emphasizes states' *locations* or *positions*, such as in the *checkerboard* pattern, for a country's security, and it does not directly consider *power* as a remedy against threat. Thus, both models contain a *balance-of-power* premise; yet, each defines the concept quite differently.

It seems ironic to me that the pejorative term, "power politics," appears to be attached to the common description of geopolitics, an attachment that has harmed its legitimacy. Nonetheless, I have rarely seen "power" ever mentioned in the traditional portrayals of geopolitics. The power-reference is essential to the realist model, where it is enlisted with respect. Thus, I would want to remove "power" from geopolitics and have it lodged within realism, its logical home.

(12) The "critical geopolitics" or post-modernist challenge. I authored an article (2006) that sought to distinguish between the "modernist" and the "post-modernist" versions of geopolitics. In my analysis, I concluded the two approaches took quite different paths, and these paths clearly did not cross at any point of intersection. A major departure came, in my opinion, in the two descriptions of the term. Here, the critics saw, inherent to classical geopolitics, elites' use of power-politics toward subjugating and exploiting peoples and nations. Rather, mine and the traditionalists saw in classical geopolitics a neutral tool for understanding some of the complexities of foreign affairs, its theories devoid of any ideological or nationalist motive. While the critical-geopolitics school provides some contribution, I have found

it lacking in theory, and my stance has been, instead, to follow the traditions of the original geopolitical model.

Another variation between post-modernist and modernist geopolitics rests with the question of analysis levels, whether one's interest sets at the decision-making or at the strategic-balancing levels. The critics "de-construct" the words and actions of foreign-affairs elites in their decision-making practices so as to uncover alleged policies of exploitation. This school lacks any concern for the strategic realm, a focus that, likewise, erases an interest to locating and applying objective theory. On the other side, classical geopolitics stays at the "structural" level, the strategic, regional, and national actions and policies associated to a state's position, location, resources, and the other features of space and geography. Ignored in the classical positions are the motivations of human subjectivity.

(13) How to apply theories from the geopolitical model. My proof for an effective application of theory to foreign-affairs events lies with the individual observer. That is, if a particular theory, as taken from the geopolitical model, lends to a person some understanding of an event, then that theory has proven to be of some worth in its application.

Conclusion

I offer two applications of theories now residing within my model. The first compares the Peloponnesian War of ancient Greece with contemporary South American diplomacy. (Kelly 2011, in Agnew and Duncan) The geopolitical structures of both regions can be described as *checkerboards*, featuring the leap-frogging characteristic of "my neighbor my enemy, but the neighbor of my neighbor my friend." Nonetheless, the *patterns* within the two checkerboard configurations took opposing directions, the ancient Greek being rigid and violent; the contemporary American being flexible and peaceful.

Indeed, the rigidity of the Greek pattern made the war extremely deadly and peace unlikely, until finally the involvement of Persia on the side of Sparta brought defeat upon the Athenian navy, ending the thirty-year stalemate. That rigid and violent pattern, fortunately, is not the case of present-day South America, for several reasons: the inability or unwillingness of the republics to wage two-front warfare; the *distances* and *rugged terrain* separating the major countries; the lack of a *naval involvement*, making the *distances* even more substantial; and the absence of an outside interventor to alter the *balance's* stability.

The escalation potential from local to strategic conflict in the Peloponnese was acutely high, with at least four *shatterbelts* contributing to the war's beginning. *Shatterbelts* resemble "catalytic wars" where local incidents within regions may prompt a violent involvement between outside opponents of a strategic reach. Since Independence, South America, in contrast to Middle America, has not suffered from *shatterbelts*, the reason being that the continent resides *distant* from the national interests of global great powers. Thus, any strategic rivalry that may identify with local strife will not transpire.

Athens, being a *maritime state*, and Sparta, a *land-based nation*, further stagnated their war in that the one's strength could not defeat the other's strength. After years of human and material waste on either side, finally the intervention of Persia to over-*balance* Sparta against Athens by purchase of a Spartan *sea-power* superiority, brought eventual defeat to the Athenian navy that ended this disastrous conflict. In contrast, South American militaries lacked a *maritime reach*, their armed forces intended more for local stability and frontier security.

Finally, the *distances* among the major players held relevance in both cases. For Greece, the *checkerboard* structures revealed shorter spaces among Greek rivals, causing a dependence on fortified cities, some of which were destroyed, others protected. The *maritime-landward* contrasts among the major combatants kept the violence running for thirty years, vastly augmenting the destructiveness. The Athenian decision to invade a *distant* Syracuse proved a disaster for its cause, the fleet and army being destroyed. In contrast, the *strategic isolation* of South America from the *northern temperate Great Powers* shed the continent from the possibility of outside northern intervention, preventing *shatterbelts* in the region, and again, the *distances* separating the major republics preserved the stability within the *checkerboard* structure.

The second application compares two contrasting "Grand Strategies" (Layne 2007) currently debated within the United States security apparatus. While perhaps more attuned to the realist model, each shows, too, a partial geopolitical resemblance. The first, labeled *preponderance*, has dominated as policy since the 1950s. Its basic parameters meet these three traits:

- 1) Contain expansionist Russia and China, while preventing the rise of Japan and Germany as great-power opponents to North America. The stability of this structure would bring economic and security benefits to the Yankee as global hegemon.
- 2) Deter all threats to this strategic stability by U.S. interventions within both the global *core* and *periphery*. In this goal, our involvement in Vietnam

focused as much on stabilizing Japan as on blocking an expansionist China. Our intervention in Bosnia was based on stabilizing our NATO allies. Occupation of Iraq kept oil flowing to Japan and Europe. Of course, these involvements were costly; yet, the US could absorb the expenses in view of the rewards brought via its hegemony.

- 3) Sponsor an inter-dependent trade and investment regime among America's allies, open to coopting Russia and China into it later on. Such a "neo-liberal" format for the U.S. translated to unfavorable trade balances, outsourcing of its industries, lowering of worker and environmental standards, and the like. Again, the excessive costs could be borne in light of the ample benefits.

But, the high wealth expenditures of *preponderance*, its opponents allege, have proven too costly to the Yankee and have encouraged over-extension of resources and a weakening of the national economy that will bring decline and will attract eventual great power opponents.

An *off-shore balancing* Grand Strategy offers a more favorable approach that the United States should and must take. The primary assumptions are these:

- Retrench our global commitments to Japan and Germany and allow for their rise to independent great-power status. Resist intervening in *peripheral areas* meant to attract their loyalty. Likewise, no longer oppose the rise of a great power in China. Accept an eventual shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world.
- Forsake the current inter-dependent trade policies, replacing these with a neo-mercantilism that will place primary emphasis on protecting our national wealth and on meeting our current domestic needs.
- Rely upon the US Navy to assist in *off-shore balancing* astride the *Eurasian rimlands* favorable to US national interests, particularly in *positioning* against an expansionist China by aligning with its *encircling* Asian rivals.

Editorial Note: D&UE invites readers to submit written responses to the above essay for consideration of publication. The author, Phil Kelly, also invites readers to directly share with him any comments relative to his suggestive for meeting the methodological challenges confronting his project of constructing a geopolitical model. Professor Kelly may be reached at Phil Kelly,

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