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Gyula Csurgai

Geopolitical Analysis

A Multidimensional Approach to Analyze Power Rivalries
in International Relations





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info@aracneeditrice.it

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www.gioacchinoonoratieditore.it
info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

via Vittorio Veneto, 20
00020 Canterano (RM)
(06) 45551463

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Preface

For a long period, geopolitical analysis had been reserved to military institutes, some specialised think–tanks, intelligence services, and high–ranking managers. Today, the word *geopolitics* is widely used by the media, and also in numerous political and economic spheres. Moreover, geopolitics is taught at civilian universities in a considerable number of countries. Additionally, the evolution of geopolitical approaches has led to divergent contemporary schools of thought and variant methodologies in the field of geopolitics. In the English language literature on geopolitics, there are rather few publications that incorporate the geopolitical analysis method which is more often dealt with in the works of contemporary European schools of thought. This book seeks to fill this existent gap.

Contemporary international relations are characterised by an increasing complexity. The difficulty of apprehending the epoch in which we live in is due, among other factors, to an increased number of actors, rapid technological advances, geoeconomic rivalries, identity conflicts, and tensions caused by the contradictory processes of globalisation. Due to this increased complexity, geopolitical knowledge and the capacity to carry out geopolitical analysis become ever more relevant for different professional activities relating to diplomacy, international organisations, various government agencies, military, intelligence services, economic spheres, and journalism, among other relevant areas. Furthermore, geopolitical knowledge can empower that part of the citizenry which seeks to go beyond the simplistic media coverage of international events in order to better comprehend the major geopolitical issues facing their country. Thereby, the geopolitical analysis method is a useful and pragmatic tool for deciphering the complexities of

the international system through taking into consideration a great number of enduring and variable factors.

This book does not contain abstract theories based on highly intellectualised language, comprehensible only by a reduced circle of individuals in academia. As well, this publication is not about a debate on the different geopolitical schools of thought amongst experts of the study of international relations and political science. Instead, this book, using an accessible language, is addressed to the public at large with the aim of presenting the geopolitical analysis method in a clear and explicit manner. This method of analysis has been taught by the author of this publication for 25 years at a number of universities, think-tanks, international organisations, private corporations and government agencies, in Switzerland and a number of other countries. It should also be noted here that the views and analyses expressed in this book solely represent those of the author.

Further, I would like to thank a number of colleagues with whom I have had very positive exchanges, as regards geopolitics, for a number of years. These interactions have positively contributed to my own reflections on this discipline. Short of an exhaustive list, I would like to mention in this context, Oskar Baffi, Yolande Camporini, Alin Cristian, David Crikemans, Pedro Dalcerro, Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Laris Gaiser, Ricardo Nuno Teixeira de Gouveia, Goran Jovanovic, Alexandre Lambert, Pau Puig i Scotoni, José Miguel Alonso Trabanco, Bernard Wicht, and Anselm Zurfluh.

I am very grateful as well to my former students who attended my lectures in geopolitics. The interactions with them during my 25 years of teaching this field have been very enriching and their positive feedback encouraged me to write this book.

I am particularly grateful to the International University in Geneva, where in 2009 I could introduce a whole course on geopolitical analysis. During this ten year of teaching I have had most inspiring discussions with students coming from all over the world to study at the International University in Geneva. These exchanges have been essential for further developing the course and for finetuning the contents of this book.

Some of the former participants of my courses continued their specialisation in geopolitics and have been using their analytical skills in their day-to-day work at various government agencies, the military, the media, international organisations and private businesses. In this view, I would like to thank Austin Chehrazi for his editing work. He is a great person to collaborate with and to count on at all times. Last, but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my wife Alexandra and my children, Regina and Julien, for their valuable and continuous support.

Introduction

The current process of globalisation has been challenging the legitimacy of the “Westphalian” nation–state. The intensification of different transnational flows, increasing global interconnectedness combined with a rapid development of information and communication technologies, and the internationalisation of economic systems have all considerably influenced international relations. Some political scientists and theorists of international relations hastily concluded that these changes signalled the end of the nation–state and predicted that globalisation would lead to a borderless world along with the end of geography and geopolitics. However, the geopolitical map of the world is still shaped by factors of demography, geography, history, and cultural and national identity, among other elements. Likewise, competition for control of strategic zones and natural resources has not lost its significance as political events in recent years have demonstrated in Central and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and different parts of Africa.

Contemporary international relations have been characterised by a great complexity due to the increasing role of non–state actors, resource competition, identity conflicts, disinformation, geostrategic rivalries, tensions caused by contradictory effects of globalisation and a global power shift. To deal with this difficulty, the geopolitical method of analysis can be a useful tool, since it takes into account the strategic, historical, geographical, cultural and economic spheres in deciphering the complexity of current and potential future conflicts. The geopolitical approach is not only interdisciplinary but it integrates multiple causes and dimensions of conflicts. International relation theories often lack a multi–dimensional approach combined with an interdisciplinary framework.

These theories such as realism, idealism, and functionalism, among others, have the common feature of constraining the interpretation of international relations to an oversimplified framework for analysis. This can result in the failure to analyse in depth the complexity of the contemporary world system. The inaccurate diagnoses of tensions, crises, or wars can lead to the implementation of inappropriate strategies that not only fail to bring about a remediation of the state of affairs, but can also exacerbate them.

Many prominent theories of international relations are based on mono-causality. These theories interpret political events through a limited ideological filter: for instance, Marxists emphasised the importance of class struggle while liberals underscored the expansion of the free market economy. In particular, followers of liberalism and Marxism have considered that most problems in society, including political rivalries, are consequences of economic challenges, whether they are issues of competition between businesses or contradictions between social classes. For example, Marxists maintained that war between communist countries could not occur in spite of certain rivalries between these states. Nonetheless, in 1978 war broke out between the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia and the Vietnamese communists for control of a section of the Mekong delta. This conflict arose mainly due to the rival territorial interests of two communist countries; consequently, it was a geopolitical encounter.

Contrary to explanations based on mono-causality, geopolitics takes into consideration various causes and influences that can impact a given political situation. The geopolitical approach integrates factors of continuity in the historical dimension; events on their own are not explanatory. In the geopolitical perspective, emphasis is not placed on the political event itself but on its insertion in durable logic. For instance, the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq reopened the Sunni-Shia rivalry. The intervention was not the cause but an accentuating factor for a pre-existing rivalry between these two main branches of Islam that should have been taken into consideration in the historical perspective.

The logic of the geopolitical analysis method is multidimensional: it seeks to identify the interactions between the different enduring factors and variables on the internal and external levels of states in a time and space dimension. The notion of space refers to geography while the concept of time denotes retrospective and prospective methodologies. Retrospective is the historical dimension that a geopolitical approach integrates with other enduring factors and variables in order to make an assessment of a given situation at present.

Due to the rather rapid development of information and communication technologies, the permissible time for decision making has been considerably reduced; concurrently, the amount of information to process has multiplied. It is therefore a challenging task to select, analyse information and integrate the results in decision making processes. Prospective approach, also termed strategic foresight, is the projection of a current situation into the future. It is rather impossible to precisely tell what shall happen in the future, however, different scenarios can be elaborated on as regards the possible impending evolutions of a given geopolitical condition. The objective of the strategic foresight in geopolitical analysis is to anticipate different situations that may occur in order to help decision making processes on different levels, ranging from political, economic, and diplomatic to military.

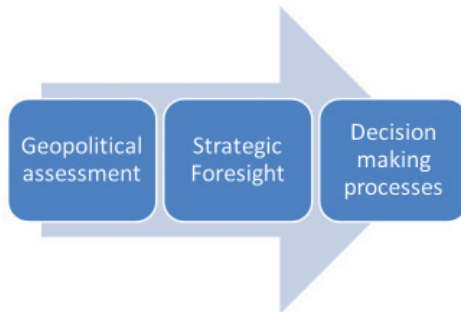


Figure 1.1.

As a result of the internationalisation of economies, the current world system has evolved into a global scheme of integrated economic spaces. In this globalised world economy, more enterprises have become global actors, conquering markets and economic spaces that no longer coincide with the nation states and their territories. Consequently, a great number of these enterprises have become geopolitical actors. Moreover, geopolitical tensions, conflicts and trends can influence the activities of businesses. Therefore, geopolitical factors must increasingly be taken into consideration by companies.

Mainstream media presentations are descriptive and often provide only superficial explanations of events in international politics. Moreover, information manipulation by different actors impacts the corporate and/or government dominated media networks. One can cite the narrative of the alleged Iraqi threat of the “weapons of mass destruction” used as pretext for the 2003 US-led invasion of that country. Geopolitical analysis seeks to go beyond the descriptive and chronological presentation of events. It seeks to examine the in-depth causes of a given situation and the real objectives of the different geopolitical actors in order to be able to put events in perspective.

To become an analyst in geopolitics one has to understand the notion of cultural diversity rather well. Major Western ideologies are characterised by universalism. For instance, the idea of exporting the Western model of liberal democracy to parts of the world where this kind of political system has had no historical roots, or the promotion of free market economy in societies where cultural and socioeconomic conditions differ significantly from the West, illustrate the problem of universalism. People in the Western World often look at other non-Western civilisations according to Western norms, values and perceptions. Geopolitical analysis is contrary to this vision as it is based on the differentiation of cultures. Each ethnic group and nation has its own cultural identity. Each geopolitical situation is particular and different from another one and has its own geographic, cultural, demographic and historic characteristics. A geopolitical analyst cannot examine a given geopolitical sit-

uation through his/her own cultural and national perceptions but has to go beyond those representations (cultural–national filters). The analyst has to *put himself in the shoes* of the “other” party and understand different mentalities, norms, values, and perceptions — amongst other components — at play.

In geopolitics both objective and subjective factors have to be taken into consideration. Objective factors as such could include the size of a country or the demographic increase of a given population in a given geographic zone while subjective parameters could refer to the cognitive aspects of a geopolitical space or the symbolic meaning of a given territory for a nation. Subjective dimensions constitute the geopolitical representations that considerably influence the mindset of different actors seeking to control a given territory.

Geographical or historical determinism is refuted in the geopolitical analysis approach presented in this book. Geopolitical analysis is not the justification for control of a geographic zone by a given state due to a certain interpretation of history or religion disseminated through geopolitical representations. The geopolitical analyst has to take into consideration the different and often contradictory representations of diverse geopolitical actors seeking to claim a given territory or maritime zone.

The main objectives of this book are the following: to present the different components and methodology of geopolitical analysis and to highlight the importance of integrating geopolitical factors in decision–making processes. The structure of the book follows these same objectives. The presentation of the different parameters of the geopolitical analysis method and their correlations in various situations will be followed by a case study illustration.

1.1. Geopolitical Analysis Method

Geopolitics can be defined as the examination of interactions between political processes and geographic spaces in which these

processes take place. Geopolitics is not a separate social science but rather an interdisciplinary method of analysis that integrates various branches of the social sciences; on the other hand, geopolitics is not the synthesis of the various disciplines in social sciences either. The concept of geopolitics refers to four related, but distinct, dimensions. The first relates to the notion of geopolitical representations. As Yves Lacoste affirms¹, conflicting territorial claims are often related to the rivalry of representations of a given territory in the collective mentality of human groups. These geopolitical representations which are connected to national myths, symbols, religions and a certain interpretation of history, have an important impact on strategies for the control of a given territory contested by two or more ethnic groups. For instance, to understand the Kosovo question one has to consider the rivalry of geopolitical representations of Serbs and Albanians related to this region.

The second dimension refers to geopolitical projects. States have had different geopolitical objectives depending on geographic, ideological, economic factors, and power projection capacities. These objectives have been formulated in geopolitical projects. For instance, the Anglo–American sea powers have always maintained that they had to influence international power distributions in order to prevent the emergence of a major continental power, or an alliance of powers, that could dominate the landmass of Eurasia. When examining geopolitical projects, one has to take into consideration the associated geopolitical representations and discourses since they can be used as instruments to validate such schemes in the eyes of a given population; as these representations can exercise important psychological influence on people in a given socio–political and historical context.

The third dimension of the concept of geopolitics refers to the exercise of geopolitics itself. States have practised geopolitics to achieve strategic objectives throughout history. These geopolitical objectives — often stated in geopolitical projects — have been considered vital for the security of the given states and have played

1. LACOSTE Yves (ed.) (1993), *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*, Flammarion, Paris.

important roles in foreign policy. The practical application of geopolitics is *geostrategy*, that is, the strategic management of geopolitical interests which can also be defined as the strategies of actors designed to achieve their geopolitical objectives. For example, to ensure access to warm seaports and to influence the political evolution of neighbouring countries have been constant elements of Russian geopolitical projects and practises. These strategic objectives have been defined in different writings of geopolitical thinkers who have elaborated geopolitical representations and projects which in turn have often influenced the practise of geopolitics. For instance, it is interesting to note the geopolitical representation of Eurasia in Zbigniew Brzezinski's book, *The Grand Chessboard*:

Eurasia is the globe's largest continent... A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions. About 75% of the world's people live in Eurasia, and most of the world's physical wealth is there as well, both in its enterprises and underneath its soil...Eurasia accounts for about three-fourths of the world energy resources...Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played.²

Starting from this geopolitical representation of Eurasia that highlights its strategic importance, Brzezinski elaborates a geopolitical project and a geostrategy for the United States, seeking to influence power politics in Eurasia in a favourable manner vis-à-vis American geopolitical interests.

The fourth dimension of the concept of geopolitics refers to a method of interdisciplinary analysis. This dimension also integrates the above mentioned three dimensions: geopolitical representations, projects and the practise of geopolitics by state and non-state actors. Geopolitical reasoning takes into consideration the geographical dimension that should be considered not only in its physical sense, but in terms of demographic, cultural and economic aspects as well.

2. BRZEZINSKI Zbigniew (1997), *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, p. 31.

Furthermore, the external and internal factors related to the geopolitical situation in question need to be taken into account. These factors can be divided into constant, enduring and variable. Constant factors refer to some physical geographic factors such as location, enduring factors refer to cultural identity such as language or religion, and variable factors are those that change on both the internal level (inside of state borders) and external levels (interstate and global level). These variable components refer to demography, socio-political structure, alliance configuration, strategic motivation, economic interest, and technological factors, among others. Also, historical factors have to be integrated into the analysis as these factors play an important role in the comprehension of a given geopolitical situation. The roots of power rivalries at present are very often to be found in the past. In conclusion, the geopolitical method can be defined as an analysis of the interactions between socio-political situations and their territorial dimensions, taking into consideration the historic, geographic, strategic, political, identity, demographic and economic factors related to these situations, at both the internal and external levels of states.

The most important parameters that a geopolitical analyst has to take into consideration when examining a given geopolitical configuration are briefly presented in the following chapters of this book. These parameters are also indicated in the circles of the following graph.

The Geopolitical analysis method contains some elements of the so-called *systemic approach*. In this context, a geopolitical analyst has to first identify these parameters and then examine the interactions between these factors in different time and space considerations. The above-listed parameters are not isolated and are often overlapping. Each of the listed factors can interact with each other. A geopolitical configuration is shaped by the interactions between these factors³. The examination of the interrelations between these factors is carried out on different geographic scales:

3. Dussuoy Gérard (2009), *Traité de relations internationales, Tome III. Les théories de la mondialité*, Harmattan, Paris, p. 224.

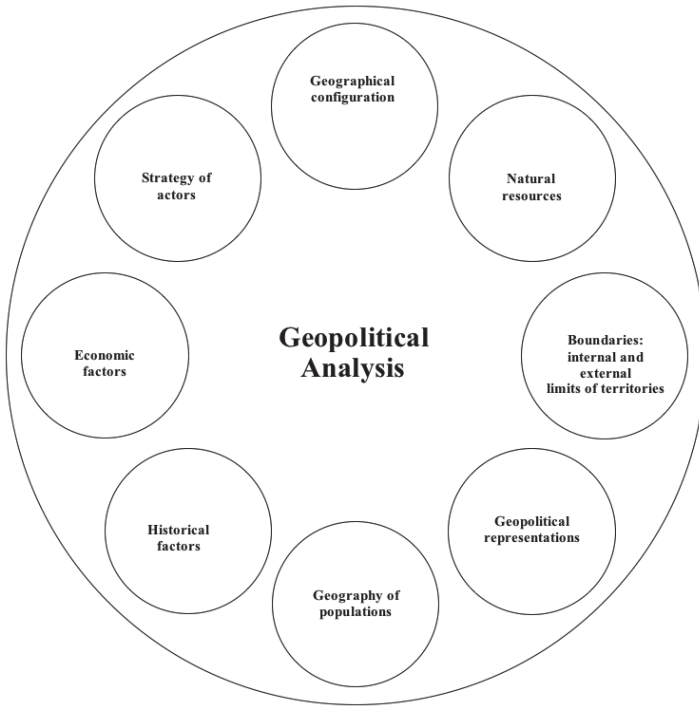


Figure 1.2. The constant, enduring and variable factors of geopolitical analysis.

- within the state: on local, regional and national levels (internal geopolitics);
- between states: on macro–regional, continental and global levels (external geopolitics).

A geopolitical analyst can be compared to an observer in a hot-air balloon who is permanently zooming in and out with a binocular from micro to macro and from macro to micro, in order to observe a given situation on the globe. A local geopolitical event is often influenced by external influences; a power rivalry between regional and global powers can impact the internal geopolitical configuration of a given country at a given moment in history due to its stra-

tegic location or its natural resources, amongst other factors. For instance, the geopolitical evolution of Kosovo has at the outset some local dimensions: the status of the Serb minority in that territory that also impacts the territorial organisation of Kosovo and its power sharing mechanism between the different communities, among other things. Secondly, the 2008 unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo can have some regional geopolitical implications, for instance for Macedonia, which has a considerable Albanian minority. On a continental level, the Kosovo independence experience may influence other nationalist movements across European states. On a global level, the Kosovo question has played an important role in power rivalries between major geopolitical actors such as the United States and Russia. The US gained an important strategic position in the southeast of Europe by supporting the independence of Kosovo while Russian regional influence weakened in the process.

1.2. The Main Motivations for Controlling a Geographic Zone

In geopolitical analysis the strategies of different actors seeking to control a given geographic zone have to be examined. The area under examination can be a territorial or maritime zone. In some cases, the control of a given airspace can also become a geopolitical stake between different states. This for instance is the case between Greece and Turkey. States and non-state actors seek to control a given geographic zone and counter the strategies of rivals to control the same sector due to the perceived value consideration related to the contested area. The major value considerations in geopolitics that can influence the motivations of the different actors for control of a given geographic zone are the following:

- wealth;
- strategic;
- cognitive factors, representation;
- regrouping of a same identity group.