

Geopolitical Theories of the Past and Present: An Analytical Overview

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Abstract:

Geopolitics had primarily focused on the influence of geographical factors on international politics and state behaviour, thanks to the classical geopolitical theories propounded in the late 19th century and first-half of 20th century. Geopolitics, ever since its genesis in 1898, has undergone evolutionary process, as testified by its transdisciplinary character. While Mahan's 'Sea Power theory' posited the control of the seas as decisive factor in international power struggles, Mackinder considered 'Heartland' as the key to control the world, Spykman put forth 'Rimland' to world-domination and Haushofer laid paramount emphasis on 'Pan-region. Despite the validation of geopolitical theories in several contexts, the study of geopolitics was multifariously castigated during the inter-war and Cold war periods. The disdain for geopolitics was tantamount to the virtual eclipse of geopolitics as a subject and public discourse. Critical geopolitics has since 1990s begun to offer an objective analysis of geopolitical culture. In parallel, geoeconomics, which engendered the hopes for a "new world order," was expected of replacing geopolitics. Ironically enough, those two factors could neither render geopolitics irrelevant nor obliterate geopolitical writings. Instead, the geopolitical landscape gains prominence alongside the rise of multipolarity. Of much significance are the good number of pivots around which geopolitics revolves itself in the contemporary world. Scholars of eminence in strategic studies have endeavoured to demonstrate that classical geopolitical thinking is still a valuable tool to read post-Cold War power relations. To sum up, geopolitics now presents itself in a very different way, in the context of the unipolar world of the US and the multipolar world desired by other big powers.

Keywords: Classical geopolitical theories, Sea Power concept, Heartland theory, Rimland theory, Disdain for geopolitics, Critical Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, Pivots of geopolitics, Relevance of geopolitical theories

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Geopolitics, in the recent times, has been a much-overused term “to describe, explain, or analyze specific foreign policy issues and problems.”¹ Due to its transdisciplinary nature, it is a difficult task to delimit the boundaries of geopolitics. Simply, “all concepts have histories and geographies; and the term ‘geopolitics’ is no exception.”² This new field of specialization, as the history unfolds, has undergone an evolutionary process in terms of its definition and methodology. The historical rivalries among the states for control over the territory and resources testify to the existence of geopolitical ruminations, of course, at the regional level. Akin to the evolutionary process of biological organisms, organic vision of the state was expounded by Carl Ritter (1779-1859), one of the founders of modern geography. Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) adapted Ritter’s idea of ‘living space’ to develop political geography and geopolitical thought, albeit the latter term did not exist. Aptly, many European powers, clamoured of ‘living space,’ were envious of a few great powers rivetted to imperialism and colonialism during late 19th and early 20th centuries. This situation became conducive to the progression of a quite a few geopolitical thoughts. This study attempts to offer an insight into the salient features of classical geopolitics (Part I), the consequent responses thereof (Part II), the transformed geopolitical ideas (Part III) and lastly, the assessment of geopolitical views for their relevance over space and time.

Part I

Epistemology of Geopolitics

Friedrich Ratzel’s idea of ‘living space’ of the state (*lebensraum*) impelled Rudolf Kjellan (1864-1922) to view the state as a living organism, rather a geographical entity. In 1898, Kjellan was the first to define geopolitics as ‘the science of state in the realm of space,’ rather an objective science. Thus, Kjellan was fully convinced of the territorial basis of the modern state in terms of location, natural resources and physical factors as the geographical elements of governance.³ Geopolitics, dealing with the influence of geographical factors on international politics and state behaviour,⁴ would then be construed as an expression of the foreign policies of states. The evolution of geopolitics as an objective science in 20th century unquestionably owed much to Mahan’s *Sea Power Theory*, Mackinder’s *Heartland Theory*, Spykman’s *Rimland Theory* and Haushofer’s concept of *Pan-regions*.

Mahan's Sea Power Theory

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), American admiral and historian attributed the rise of empires like Great Britain to the control of the seas alongside the geographical, economic and military factors including a strong merchant marine, colonies, and a powerful navy.⁵ He strongly expected the well-positioned United States would control maritime trade and colonial possessions. Mahan was the first to divide states into marine and land powers; and his ideas had a major influence on the US naval expansion and global geopolitics at a later stage. Mahan's ideas resonated with leading politicians of the US who finally secured the annexation of Hawaii. Similarly, Mahan's theory stirred the Spanish-American War in 1898 that led the US to gain the territories such as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

Mackinder, the Founder of Modern Geopolitics

Justly, the international relations of the early 20th century influenced much of the strategic thinking of Halford J. Mackinder (1861-1947) who was largely regarded as the founder of modern geopolitics.⁶ Having considered the location and natural resources as factors of foreign policy of a state, Mackinder had offered an epistemological explanation that "geographical features govern or, at least, guide history."⁷ Though Mackinder's outlook apparently points to the relation between geography and world politics, Francis P. Sempa, the author of *Geopolitics: From the Cold War to the 21st Century*, in a befitting tribute, hailed Mackinder as a geopolitical empiricist, not a geographical determinist.⁸

Mackinder's Geopolitical Narratives Modified in the Spatio-temporal Milieu

Mackinder's famous article, "*The Geographical Pivot of History*," presented in 1904 at the Royal Geographical Society in London, offered a matured exposition to the geopolitics. Mackinder, who weighed the increased mobility of European sea power and transcontinental railways, perceived the resource-rich northern Asia as the 'pivot area' of a future global order. The pivot area theory (1904) was a stark mandate for the British Empire to protect its interests in the view of potential threat in the offing from the Central Asian powers. In view of the European powers being deprived of the scope for expansion, Mackinder cryptically noted the possibility for the outbreak of both the world wars. Mackinder in response to the events on the eve of the First World War revised theory, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), cozily known as 'heartland theory.' This concept envisaged a solution for safeguarding Europe, with a strong note of caution to the statesmen of at the Treaty of Versailles about the possible rise of a power

(implicitly Germany) capable of gaining control over East Europe as to expand its sphere of influence, in succession, over the Heartland, the World-Island and ultimately the world.⁹ In the euphoria of having inflicted harsh punishment on Germany, the Allies scantily responded to the tenets of Mackinder's heartland theory which, instead, became a bible in the hands of Nazis. In response to the request of *Foreign Affairs* to discuss the relevance of 'pivot area' and 'heartland' in the context of the Second World War, Mackinder in July 1943 in his essay, "*The Round World and the Winning of the Peace*," echoed that his concept of the Heartland was more valid and useful than it was either twenty or forty years ago. Besides revising the boundaries of heartland, Mackinder also portended a world divided between the continental empire of the Soviet Union, a North Atlantic alliance, and the rise of the Asian powers of China and India.¹⁰

Nicholas Spykman

To Nicholas J. Spykman (1893-1944), the Dutch-American geographer, Rimland was not of marginal significance but rather the true geographic pivot of history and controlling the "Rimland was of more geopolitical importance than Mackinder's Heartland,"¹¹ Spykman was quite optimistic of the possible domination of "Rimland" region of Eurasia over the world,¹² and had gone to the extent of renaming the "Marginal Crescent" as the "Rimland."¹³ Spykman's geopolitical approach, unlike Mackinder's, was based on the issue of control of the land power by sea power as being so much essential as to control the world island. While forbidding an alliance between the USSR and China, Spykman advocated that the Rimland was predisposed to get united by a particular state that which controlled it would likely dominate the world.¹⁴ The possibility for the expansion of the EU and the NATO to the east¹⁵ was elucidated by the policy makers who sought to justify the policy of containment during the Cold War period.¹⁶

Spykman's Pitch for Geographical Factor in Foreign Policy

"It is the geographical location of a country and its relations to the centres of military power that define its problem(s) of security,"¹⁷ advocated Spykman who treated geography *per se* as a factor of utmost importance for a state's security strategy. Spykman, for certain, was not "geographical determinist" who, instead, looked upon geography as the material for a country's policy, but not the only important factor of international politics and power relations. Spykman's outlook of geography importance was well exemplified by Federico Bordonaro that "the geography of a state cannot be ignored by men who formulate its policy;" and that "geography gave the U S, not Russia, a decisive strategic and economic advantage."¹⁸ Even as

revering Mahan's theory, Spykman assessed other geographical factors that remain unchanged¹⁹ as well as their variable significance for foreign policy. Spykman's concept, like the Heartland theory, has carved a niche in the strategic calculations of major powers.²⁰

Karl Haushofer's *Geopolitik*

German geopolitical thinkers led by Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), as noted earlier, imbibed the Mackinder's theories in the 1920s. Haushofer established in 1922 the Institute of Geopolitics (*Institut für Geopolitik*) in Munich to promote geopolitical ideas in terms of war and imperial design. His sworn commitment to fructify German international dominance entailed him to developing the theory of the "pan-regions" (Pan-Europe, Pan-Asia, Pan-America, and Pan-Russia) that would likely to emerge as an intermediate stage before global German dominance. His brainchild, *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, the journal of geopolitics, emphasized the core concept *Lebensraum* (living space) and significantly influenced Nazi ideology, besides articulating as to prevent American control over Rimland. While Mackinder considered 'Heartland' as key to control the world and Spykman advanced 'Rimland' to world-domination, Haushofer laid paramount emphasis on 'Pan-region.'²¹

Part II

Mackinder's Concepts as Corroborated

It is of much significance that Mackinder's strategic narrative covertly legitimized the US foreign policy in World War II and during the Cold War,²² as vindicated by the felicitation to Mackinder at the American Embassy on March 31, 1944 by Ambassador John Winant.²³ Though George Kennan was the brain behind the Truman's foreign policy doctrine (March 1947) of containing Soviet influence, "Mackinder was the intellectual father of US containment policy after World War II."²⁴ Appreciably, the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger his book *Diplomacy* (1994) noted the continuing relevance of Mackinder's ideas. The significance of Mackinder's views was rationally justified by Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski who labelled Central Asia as a geopolitical chessboard.²⁵ Robert Kaplan (Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security and author of a host of publications) discussed the US-China conflict in the context of Mackinder's geopolitical ideas. No wonder that the 1990s steered an epic decline of geopolitical realism in the wake of collapse of the Soviet Union; and simultaneously, the Project of NATO enlargement was certain to awaken the old geopolitical nuances.²⁶ Later in April 2005, in his annual state of the nation address, Russian President Vladimir Putin termed the collapse of

the Soviet empire “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”²⁷ Arguably, Soviet Union was not an ideological threat but rather a geopolitical rival.

Disdain for Geopolitics in the Cold War Context

If the classical geopolitics counted on “empirical and objective methodologies,” critical geopolitics represented an alternative illustration of “the original concept becoming ideological.” Phil Kelly further outlined that “the geopolitics, similar to other academic models, has lacked a unified approach for several reasons.”²⁸ Pitiably, geopolitics remained in the moribund backwaters during the inter-war period for having been variously castigated by prominent geographers. In 1927, Carl O. Sauer (at the University of California at Berkeley) condemned geopolitics as “wayward child of the geographic family;” and the American geographers in the 1940s looked down geopolitics as a “Nazi science.”²⁹ That “geopolitics was a ‘pseudo-science’ and not worthy of serious consideration” was a derogatory remark of another American geographer Isaiah Bowman.³⁰ Even the classical geopolitics was not taught at many university departments of geography or international relations.³¹ After World War II the study of geopolitics fell into disrepute because of its association with Nazi Germany; and its negative image in the decades after World War II virtually dissuaded academic geographers to think of geopolitics. The renowned American geographer Richard Hartshorne in the early 1950s warned fellow scholars that “the subject (geopolitics) was an *intellectual poison* and, as such, was not a suitable subject matter for considered academic reflection.”³² The disdain for geopolitics was tantamount to “the virtual eclipse of geopolitics in the American academic realm beginning in the late 1960’s.”³³ No way surprising that geopolitics was banished from respectable public discourse and academic studies; unequivocally, the post-war taboo of geopolitics in the Anglophone world was absolute, lamented David Atkinson and Klaus Dodds who analyzed the geopolitical traditions through history.³⁴

Critical Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Engendered the Hopes for a New World Order

In pursuit of offering an objective analysis of geopolitical culture and the formulation of foreign policy, the term critical geopolitics was coined by in 1990 by Simon Dalby.³⁵ The transition period from Cold War era to globalization witnessed the new geopolitical thought, as “problem-based and present-oriented approach.”³⁶ Critical geopolitics deals with “the politics of the geographical specification of politics,”³⁷ simultaneously with emphasis on “the historical, economic, and geographical processes, as opposed to the classical geopolitics concentrating on

the impact of geography upon foreign policy with its focus on producing its own ‘form of knowledge and rationality.’³⁸ Yet, the goals, actions and outcomes of geopolitics are an amalgamation of politics and economics with least scope for exclusivity of either.³⁹ Interestingly, geopolitical uncertainty has economic consequences including trade disruptions, as vindicated by the Russia-Ukraine war and US-Israel-Iran war. A study, based on sustainable trade index by World Bank, shows geopolitical risks for 30 select countries with New Zealand adoring highest level of stability and the US has moderate stability, while Pakistan and Myanmar at the bottom level of stability.⁴⁰

Coincidentally, geoeconomics forms a new wave of interest developed as the interplay between commerce and strategy in pursuit of achieving geopolitical goals. Even as geoeconomics, unlike geopolitics, can hardly boast of a long theoretical or conceptual historiography, it was the French economic geographer, Jacques Boudeville, who used the term to explain the liberal growth pole theory in the 1960s, as an alternative to geopolitics.⁴¹ Even so, Edward Nicolae Luttwak is credited with the introducing the concept, geoeconomics, in the early 1990s. Luttwak in his article argued that the focus of international power competition was shifting from military might to economic strategies in geopolitical competition.⁴² To Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, the authors of *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, geoeconomics is all about the use of economic instruments,⁴³ including tariffs, supply chains and technology.

In the post-Cold War context marked by globalization, economic interdependence and the information revolution, geoeconomics engendered the hopes for a “new world order” that would replace geopolitics as the driving force in international politics. Surprisingly, those factors have not rendered geopolitics irrelevant, nor could geoeconomics obliterate geopolitical writings.⁴⁴ For all its being a key concept gaining new resonance in policy analysis, “the use of economic tools is likely to prove ineffective or even counterproductive.”⁴⁵ Curiously enough, the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century is hinging on rise of multipolarity as a response to shifting dynamics of global power. Of much pertinence is the candid observation that “geopolitics and geoeconomics are better understood as names for distinct geostrategic discourses”⁴⁶ that would enable them “co-exist and often reinforce one another.”⁴⁷

Part III

Pivots of Different ‘Geopolitics’ of 21st Century

Quite a lot of pivots around which geopolitics are playing itself. These may encompass climate change entailing environmental pollution and food insecurity, scarcity of vital resources including water and energy, maritime security, strategic locations, history and civilization, population and urbanization, and culture shocks based on religious and ethnic identities, with prospects in the offing for many geopolitical ideas.⁴⁸ Undeniably, geopolitics is a multifactorial method of analysis, as evident in the modern geopolitical discourses. All these constitute a source of conflict across political boundaries, as a geopolitical conflagration between the great powers and the great power-aspirants.

Food Insecurity: A Critical Geopolitical Factor

“Food is the new oil. Land is the new gold,” sarcastically commented Lester Brown, an American environmental analyst. Food insecurity manifesting geopolitics of food arises out of scarcity of land and water, setting in motion a chain of reactions. Arguably, the ability to grow food rather agro-food-sector is fast becoming a new form of geopolitical leverage; and Lester Brown further outlines the geopolitical overtones encompassing of food production, consumption and trade.⁴⁹ Food security governance portrays “competition for agricultural resources forming both a cause and a consequence of geopolitical rivalry.”⁵⁰

The food crisis in the offing would become a complicated issue challenging the international community, if the coastal regions are submerged by the rise of sea level, as discussed later in this paper (Section 9.2). The catastrophe would make 21st century the geopolitics of food insecurity. Strength in food resources, besides being a deterrence against a militarily powerful nation, is a tool of political leverage, a weapon of war and a driver of global instability. Major food exporters-- like Russia, U.S. and Brazil—used to build geopolitical alliances through food aid, fertilizer supply and trade agreements.⁵¹ Food-importing countries, on the other hand, seek to buy/ get large blocks of land for farming on lease in other countries. Oil-rich Arab investors, for instance, are turning to countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Cambodia and Thailand, while China has lease-lands in Australia, Russia and Brazil, besides Southeast Asia and South Korea and Madagascar. Implicitly, a food-insecure nation relying on food imports would be prone to geopolitical risks encompassing security risks to the extent of compromising over its sovereignty, apart from economic vulnerability, market

volatility and sanctions. The US and China are the foremost among the nations using food diplomacy as *modus operandi* for building alliances and exerting influence on food-insecure nations of Africa, Asia and Middle East. China's influence in Africa through food aid and agricultural contracts portrays geopolitical competition with the West and Russia.⁵² Food security as a site of world politics has in the recent times gained geopolitical implication during the 2007/2008 spike in food prices, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in the Ukraine from 2022. The conflicts in 2023–24, a case in point, had driven 135 million severe hunger-stricken- people across 20 countries; so were the economic shocks a major driver in 21 food-crisis countries, affecting 75 million people. Food-crisis or food insecurity was to blame for the plight of 64.3 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in 38 countries and 26 million refugees and asylum-seekers in 56 countries, besides 36.4 million children in 32 food-crisis countries.⁵³

Geopolitics of Climate Change

Classical geopolitical theories did not foresee climate change; but geopolitics of climate change has now drawn the attention of the entire mankind. Climatic change would cause more damage to humanity than Second World War in terms of intra- and inter-violence, food shortage, loss of cultivable and habitable land. Climate change has its direct impacts (higher temperatures and changes in rainfall pattern in the form of droughts vis-a-vis floods) and indirect impacts (diseases, unreliable water supply, diminishing crop yields, rising sea levels and mass migrations). Climate change poses serious geopolitical challenges encompassing resources (mainly water and food), trade and armed conflict. Melting of polar ice caps due to global warming will pose an imminent threat in the form of rise of sea level that would sweep away the arable land as well as the densely populated settlements in the coastal regions.⁵⁴ Rise in sea levels leads to disputes on exclusive economic zones which need to be redrawn based on the shifted-shorelines. The climate change-induced drought, for instance in 2023-24, produced food crisis in 27 countries of the Horn of Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa, apart from 71.9 million people getting affected by weather extremes in 18 countries.⁵⁵ Climate change exacerbates the existing problems of urban food insecurity as much as in rural areas and is expected to a projected population of 9.0 billion by 2050. Areas of greatest geopolitical risk are those prone to the risk of climate change which is thus a threat multiplier, especially in rendering unstable states more unstable and poor nations poorer.

Of much catastrophic in nature are the climate-change-refugees with a host of attendant geopolitical ramifications in the 21st century; and thus, migration turns to be a geopolitical force as well as a threat to the host country's territorial integrity. The population displacement, may it be intra-border or trans-border, would be a peril in the form of clashes, battles and even wars, arising out of diversified population groups differentiated by religion, sectarian faiths, language and ethnicity. The inevitable conflicts arising out of resource-constraints, for instance land and water, assume the proportions of inter-state violence when the international actors champion the cause of trans-border migrants. Climate Change, a non-conventional threat as well as a long-term security challenge, undermines the trans-regional cooperation. Climate change is thus a threat to the peace, security and stability of the states once considered as 'pivots' of power. In the context of energy transition, climate change creates new geopolitical winners and losers. Climate change becomes an intensified geopolitical hostility among the states of Russia, the US and Canada abutting the Arctic Ocean, consequent upon the melting ice cap that entails opening up new shipping routes and access to untapped resources in the Arctic.

Geopolitics of Energy

Geopolitics of energy, the focal point of international relations, economics and geography, focuses on understanding as to how energy demand and supply influence the international politics and vice versa. Energy has a long history entwined with the international system as well as incorporated great powers, alliances, conflicts and economic strategies. Though evoking the key transitions occurred over a period of history,⁵⁶ new discoveries of alternative sources of energy carry with them a host of geopolitical consequences in 21st century, pivoting on revenue, global investment in oil resources and the market mechanism for energy supplies. It was the Middle East catapulted to the strategic importance by oil that is the most common dominant energy source in 39 countries.⁵⁷ OPEC+ (an expanded alliance)⁵⁸ regulates global oil production and prices and thereby global market. Of much relevance is the geopolitical leverage exercised by Saudi Arabia and Russia as much as the revenue from oil exports. China, on its part, has its relationships developed with resource-rich states across Africa, Latin America and the Middle East through its innovative Belt and Road Initiative and trade pacts. It is no way surprising that the unstable high oil prices impinge on the prospects of US to manipulate oil producers (for instance, Russia and Iran) and consumers (China and India).⁵⁹ The energy-dependent countries are the hapless victims of the disrupted supply chains on account of warfare and blockade at chokepoints. If the Russia-Ukraine war (ever since

February 2022) jeopardized the Europe's reliance on Russian gas; and Strait of Hormoz disrupted the oil-supply chains to China, India, Japan and South Korea in the context of US-Israel-Iran war (since February 2026). Some countries have gained salience on account of shift towards renewable energy resources, such as solar energy (China), wind energy (China, India, USA, Germany and Vietnam at the top 5).⁶⁰ Of much prominence are the critical minerals like lithium (Chile), cobalt (Democratic Republic of Congo), rare earth elements (China, Brazil, India, Australia and Russia)⁶¹ and nuclear energy (USA, China, France, Russia and South Korea accounting for 71 per cent of the world's nuclear energy generation capacity in 2025).⁶²

Geopolitics of Water Resources

“The dominant conflict in geopolitics in this century is the scramble for energy, raw materials and water,” asserts Friedbert Pflüger, Director, European Centre for Energy and Resource Security, King's College London. Water scarcity in many parts of the world serves as a catalyst for geopolitical strife; interestingly enough, water crisis plunged into major wars.⁶³ Unlike the past global tensions pivoted on territorial control and oil and ideology, water turns out to be a strategic resource linked to food, energy and national security. Water has gained geopolitical connotation setting the stage for cooperation and conflict, as well as alliances and rivalries between the regions /countries which are ridden with water scarcity.

The UN estimates are quite frightening that by 2050 nearly 5.7 billion people may likely to face the water scarcity with far-reaching consequences.⁶⁴ If climate change has become a cause and effect in the form of recurring droughts and floods, water demand is further aggravated on account of technological development and irrigation-intensive agriculture. More than 50 per cent of world population living in cities confronts water shortages resulting in protests as, for example, in Mexico City and Tehran; while Cape Town (South Africa) already hit a Day Zero in 2018. Water tension is conspicuous in Middle East and North Africa (with 15 of the world's 20 most water-scarce countries), followed by South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the southwestern United States.⁶⁵ Added to this is Asia which, according to Tommy T. B. Koh, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, will likely face water as one of the biggest security challenges in the 21st century.⁶⁶ This situation, which the UN in its January 2026 report termed as water bankruptcy,⁶⁷ gets heightened by a host of factors.⁶⁸

Since 1948 there have been nearly 300 international agreements signed. Lack of robust transboundary agreements have, however, testified to the weak and fragmented global water

governance. In the context of 40 per cent of the global population settled in nearly 300 transboundary river basins, the Munich Security report favours basin-level water diplomacy and cooperation among the riparian states.⁶⁹ Through construction of dams, the upstream countries often resort to increasing or limiting the downstream flows. Every international/transboundary river becomes a geopolitically trouble spot in the coming decades, as can be understood from a few of the cases listed below:⁷⁰

- The two downstream states of Syria and Iraq experience acute water shortages whenever Turkey-built dams reduce water flows in *Tigris* and *Euphrates* rivers originating in Turkey.
- Jordan river basin, shared by Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, ends up in a highly volatile zone.
- India's plans to divert the Indus waters would become an existential issue for Pakistan. Though Indus Water Treaty of 1960 survived several wars between India and Pakistan, India has annulled the Treaty as a sequel to the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict.
- The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile tends to affect the interests of the two other riparian states of Egypt and Sudan.
- China's upstream infrastructure in the form of cascade of dams on the Mekong affects downstream Southeast Asian nations.
- A colossal hydroelectric dam on Brahmaputra River in Tibet would affect the two other downstream states of India and Bangladesh.
- Disputes over Colorado River water rights may likely to erupt between the United States and Mexico.

Strategic Locations of Perpetual Geopolitical Importance

The "geopolitics of perpetuity" refers to a landscape of continuous, long-term competition and instability, often driven, among various others, by maritime chokepoints, strategic frontiers and exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The overlapping claims among the littoral states to the EEZs-- rich in marine resources including fish and sea-bed resources like hydrocarbon reserves-- perpetuate the geopolitical conflict as, for instance, in South China Sea and Arctic Ocean. The international border or territorial disputes⁷¹ remain the potential geopolitical hostility as in the case of Sino-Indian border in the Himalayas and Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The key strategic locations that shape international power, trade and conflict include major chokepoints, like the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca as well as Suez Canal and Panama Canal (shortening the distance

between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans). Any disruption (political, military, or logistical) in the strategic routes could jeopardize global supply chains, energy markets, and manufacturing hubs. The recent chokepoint crisis at the Strait of Hormuz, a case in point, reflects the growing weaponization of supply chains by a state seeking geopolitical leverage. Historically vital for naval power and trade have been certain places like Singapore, Gibraltar and Istanbul.⁷² Physically associated with the chokepoints are the regional hubs -- Middle East, the South China Sea⁷³ and the Pacific Islands realm, Caribbean Basin, Bab el-Mandeb, Central Asia and Caucasus. The other strategic locations of geopolitical perpetuity comprise the Indo-Pacific and Arctic Ocean as well as Central Africa, Latin America, Taiwan and Greenland.

Not all oceans do have strategic significance and nor do all regions stake claim for strategic identity. Alongside their glorious past, India's 'centrality in Asia' and the Indian Ocean as 'the Heart of the Third World' testify to the fact that the Indian Ocean and India are juxtaposed with each other and mutually predisposed to evolve as entities of geostrategic implications. Indian Ocean a "zone of peace" and 'the concept of balance' were at the fore during the Cold War; currently, the Chinese 'string of pearls,' USA 'diamonds' and Indian 'nuggets' principally reflect the concerns over energy security and securing access to the SLOCs. Of much salience is the Southeast Asia's inter-oceanic location that has been at the base of its immense strategic implications all through the history.⁷⁴ Captivatingly, Southeast Asia's locational significance as 'a bridge and a barrier' as well as 'a forward zone of defence' signified the region's strategic conundrum so much as to become a theatre of War during the Second World war and also a political laboratory for testing the ideological doctrine of 'domino' theory. Among a plethora of regional organizations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-well established "centrality" in the political and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region owes much to Southeast Asia's locational significance.

Assessment of Geopolitical Theories for their Relevance

The salience of all the geopolitical theories deliberated in this study can be better understood from the cogent views of quite a few scholars of repute in geopolitical analysis; a few of them are mulled over here. "Geopolitics is a condition, not an ideology. Geopolitics moves with empires; it doesn't necessarily change."⁷⁵ "Like nationalism and imperialism, 'geopolitics' cannot be banished or deconstructed. Instead, it should be understood and are fully managed. Geopolitics should be treated as an intellectual, but also social construct."⁷⁶ Scholars of eminence in strategic studies have endeavoured to demonstrate that classical

geopolitical thinking is still a valuable tool to read post-Cold War power relations. Undeniably, there were several scholars and analysts as well as policymakers and statesmen who either imbibed, or attached credence to, the Mackinder's concepts.⁷⁷ The Mackinder's geopolitical vision of North Atlantic Alliance was six years ahead of the formation of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in April 1949. Similarly, his prophesy about by the rise of China (yellow peril, as referred by Mackinder) and India is vindicated by China's proactive strategies and India's economic growth in 21st century. Eurasia as the 'geographical pivot of history' and 'control over the heartland' are well validated by China's Belt and Road Initiative (with its inclusivity of Central Asia, which is considered as a geopolitical chessboard) and the Russi-Ukraine War. Similarly, as regards its 'oceanic frontage,' China's belligerent claim to Soth China Sea and the String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean as well as Maritime Silk Road do amply portray China's unsworn commitment to gaining control over the 'Marginal and Inner Crescents,' as outlined in Mackinder's theory. No way have exaggeration that contemporary policymakers do hardly aware of Mackinder's theory, his name at least; yet, their strategic thinking, very much influenced by Mackinder, and testified to the relevance of his ideas in the 21 st century.

Apropos of the competition across Eurasia's coastal zones, the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region reflects the logic of Spykman's Rimland theory. The US strategy by way of its alliances -- Quad and I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE and the US) -- to balance China vis-à-vis China's Maritime Silk Road adequately signifies the Rimland reasoning. Of much relevance to Spykman's concept are the control over the sea lanes and the maritime chokepoints, like Strait of Hormuz and the Malacca Strait. Though the U.S. containment policy aligned closely with Spykman's theory, USA could not prevent an alliance between the USSR and China in the context of Russia-Ukraine war. Interestingly, Mahan's sea power has its relevance even today in the form of control of sea lanes or oil shipping routes and naval power as being central to global supremacy.

As much as water a geopolitical tool, food insecurity and consequential conflict are increasingly dealt with as critical geopolitical factors. That the "Climate change will affect food, water and health, hitting the poorest hardest" and that Climate change is a "threat multiplier" justify a pertinent demand for treating the "climate as a first order geopolitical issue by the governments."⁷⁸ Energy unequivocally forms the important pivot around which geopolitics revolves itself.

As the globalized world entering an era of cooperation on technology increasingly entwined with geopolitics, critical geopolitics embarks on many comprehensive studies; yet there is possibility for certain geopolitical entities without being realized. The rise of multipolarity as a response to shifting dynamics of global power in the form of nations aligning, balancing, or remaining neutral has its influence on the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. Suffice to say, geopolitics now presents itself in a very different way, in the context of the unipolar world of the US and the multipolar world desired by other big powers.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sempa, Francis P. 2002. *Geopolitics: from the Cold War to the 21st Century*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 127p.
- ² Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Professor of Government & International Affairs at Virginia Tech's campus, Washington DC) offered a vivid account of the geopolitical narratives. See Ó Tuathail, Gearóid. 1998. "Introduction: thinking critically about geopolitics," in G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby and P. Routledge, *The Geopolitics Reader*, London: Routledge.
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- ⁴ Kristof, L. K. D. 1994. "Geopolitics," *Encyclopedia Americana*. International ed., vol.12, p. 508.
- ⁵ Mahan, Alfred Thayer. 1890. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- ⁶ So well-accomplished was Mackinder's profile that he was a Professor of Geography at Oxford University, Member of the Royal Geographical Society and Founder of the Geographical Association, Director of London School of Economics, Member of British Parliament and the British High Commissioner to Southern Russia, besides a raft of honours conferred on him.
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- ⁸ Sempa, Francis P. 2019 (October 24). "Revisiting Mackinder's 'Round World'," *Real Clear History*. https://www.realclearhistory.com/articles/2019/10/24/revisiting_mackinders_round_world_459.html (Accessed 13 March 2025). Francis P. Sempa is adjunct professor of political science at Wilkes University, and a contributing editor to *American Diplomacy*.
- ⁹ Mackinder's heartland theory that captivated the attention of all those concerned with geopolitics was so much avowed by the simplest 3-line strategic formula: "Who rules

Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the world.”

- ¹⁰ Mackinder, taking cognizance of the technological and global political dynamics, revised the geographical boundaries of heartland that encompassed almost the entire territory of Soviet Union, except the land east of Lena River. His envision of North Atlantic Alliance was six years ahead of the formation of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in April 1949.
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- ¹⁵ Science and Geopolitics of Arctic and Antarctic, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ For a detailed account, provided by Federico Bordonaro (Faculty of International Relations, Webster University Vienna), see Bordonaro, Federico, 2009 (May). “Rediscovering Spykman the Rimland, Geography of Peace and Foreign Policy,” *Exploring Geopolitics*. http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/Publication_Bordonaro_Federico_Rediscovering_Spykman_Rimland_Geography_Peace_Foreign_Policy/ (Accessed 08 April 2026).
- ¹⁷ Spykman, Nicholas J. 1942. *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York: Harcourt, p. 447.
- ¹⁸ Bordonaro, Federico, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁹ The geographical factors, Spykman weighed, include: population density, the economic structure of the country and the ethnic composition of the people, alongside the form of government and the prejudices of foreign ministers” See Spykman, Nicholas J. 1938. *op. cit.*
- ²⁰ Ó Tuathail, Gearóid and Dalby, Simon. 1998. “Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics: Towards a Critical Geopolitics,” in Ó Tuathail G. and Dalby, S. (eds), *Rethinking Geopolitics*. London and New York: Routledge.
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- ²² Krause, O. 2023 (March 28). “Mackinder's ‘heartland’ – Legitimation of US foreign policy in World War II and the Cold War of the 1950s,” *Geographica Helvetica*, vol. 78, pp.183–197. <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-78-183-2023>.
- ²³ The American Geographical Society presented the Charles P. Daley Medal to Mackinder at the American Embassy on March 31, 1944. Ambassador John Winant remarked that Mackinder was “the first who fully enlisted geography as an aid to statecraft and strategy.”

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- ³⁹ Gray, Colin S., *op. cit.* Also see Mercille, Julien. 2008. "The Radical Geopolitics of U.S. Foreign Policy: Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Logics of Power," *Political Geography*, vol. 27, pp. 570–86.

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- ⁴¹ Boudeville J-R. 1966. *Problems of Regional Economic Planning*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- ⁴² Luttwak, E. N. 1990. “From Geopolitics to Geo-economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce,” *The National Interest*, Summer, No. 20, pp 17-23. (Luttwak is a distinguished Adjunct Fellow at The Marathon Initiative and Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC).
- ⁴³ Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris. 2017. *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 384p. The economic instruments include: trade, investment, economic and financial sanctions, financial and monetary policy, energy and commodities, aid and cyber in order to advance foreign policy goals. China, foremost of all the great power politics, has for long employed geoeconomics as a tool to project power; Russia, to advance strategic objectives, shut off gas pipelines to parts of Europe in 2008; and the US imposed sanctions on Russia which annexed Crimea in March 2014 and involved in Ukraine war in February 2022.
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- ⁴⁹ Food insecurity is not just about crops failure or price-rise; and producing enough food is not all about food security which, instead, is all about who controls production, distribution, and access. See Brown, Lester R. 2011 (May/June). “The New Geopolitics of Food,” *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/04/25/the-new-geopolitics-of-food/> (Accessed 21 June 2011). Lester Brown is the founder of the Worldwatch Institute and founder and former president of the Earth Policy Institute.
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- ⁵⁵ Swinnen, Johan. *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁶ The history of energy witnessed key transitions -- age of biomass with wood as the main fuel (pre-1800s), industrial fuels of coal (18th Century), hydrocarbon era dominated by oil (19th - 20th Century) and electricity and nuclear energy (1950s-present).
- ⁵⁷ Visual Capitalist. 2026 (April 20). *The World's Biggest Energy Sources by Country*. <https://www.voronoiaapp.com/energy/Mapped-The-Worlds-Biggest-Energy-Sources-by-Country-8063> (Accessed (23 April 2026). According to the data of International Energy Agency, quoted by *Visual Capitalist (Ibid.)*, natural gas follows the oil as the prime source of energy in 29 countries; while quite a lot of Asia's largest economies, like China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam primarily rely on coal.
- ⁵⁸ OPEC+ comprises 12 members (Algeria, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Venezuela following the exit of Qatar, Indonesia Ecuador and Angola) and non-OPEC members like Russia, Kazakhstan and Mexico.
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- ⁶⁶ Tommy T. B. Koh, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, was one of the co-chairs of the jury that selected *Water: Asia's New Battleground*, authored by Brahma Chellaney, as the winner of the Bernard Schwartz Award in October 2012 from nearly 90 nominations.
- ⁶⁷ Council on Foreign Relations., *op. cit.*
- ⁶⁸ The water bankruptcy owes to uneven distribution, climate change (bringing about droughts and excessive rainfall, and increasing rate of evaporation due to rise in temperature), ever-growing demands (of population, agriculture and industry) and hydro-politics (weaponization water resources) by upstream states (regulating water flow by way of dams and diversion) depriving the downstream countries of their legitimate rights.
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- ⁷² If Singapore and Hong Kong are the entrepôt cites / trading hubs transshipping the bulk of the East-West trade, Gibraltar Strait-- connecting the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. -- is a key maritime checkpoint controlling trade routes and military access. Istanbul is located on the Bosphorus Strait -- strategic waterway connecting the Black Sea to the

Mediterranean Sea. The Czarist Russia remained a land-locked country on account of lack of access to the Mediterranean Sea; it was after the World War II that the Soviet Union on account of its hold on the Balkan states gained access through the Dardanelles Strait (connecting the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara) and through the Bosphorus Strait.

- ⁷³ The overlapping claims of the nine littoral states to the South China Sea have conferred on the latter a dubious distinction of being termed as the geopolitical lake of Southeast Asia. As per the statistical data on trade available from different sources, though inconsistent, the region in 2023, for instance, handled a total trade of around US \$5.3 trillion (accounting for 24 per cent of the global maritime trade); China, India, Japan, the US and Australia are the prominent stakeholders of the energy shipments passing through this region.
- ⁷⁴ Southeast Asia's glorious history of maritime trade and cultural contacts owes much to the vast water body and the lengthy coastline. Southeast Asia's distinct maritime character facilitated the European powers to colonize it from the beginning of 16th century. Needless to emphasize that the region occupied a niche *per se* in all the geopolitical theories during 20th century and became the stage for the proxy war of the Cold War superpowers.
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- ⁷⁷ To mention a few are: Colin S. Gray (author of *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, Crane, Russak, 1977); Henry Kissinger (*Diplomacy*, Simon & Schuster, 1994); Zbigniew Brzezinski (*The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997); Paul Kennedy (*The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, 1988) and Robert Kaplan (*The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells us*, Random House, 2010).
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