

# The Threat of Geopolitics to International Relations



# The Threat of Geopolitics to International Relations:

*Obsession with the Heartland*

By

William Mallinson and Zoran Ristic

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9738-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9738-9

To the victims of geopolitics



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## FOREWORD

We are living in a world where geopolitics has become a universal term. By looking at maps, politicians, experts, journalists and academics use it to explain the latest processes in international relations, no matter how complex and multilayered they appear to be originally. Geopolitics has entered the mass consciousness of public opinion, resembling peoples' views of the world order and national interests. Every new political crisis, be it domestic or international, revolution, regime change, an international or regional conflict, intervention, hybrid war, business interests of transnational and multinational corporations, establishment of oil and gas routes, or fluctuations of the global markets is explained through the lens of geopolitics. Voters in the United States believe that America's interests are best preserved if the country accomplishes its strategic goals in the Middle East or in the Asia-Pacific region. Russian citizens approve of military operations in Syria and the nation's efforts to join the war on terror, while the media keep publishing maps of the battlefields, involving their readers in discussions on the balance of power in the region.

The influence of geostrategic scenarios developed by think tanks and policy makers cannot be underestimated. It is largely the geopolitical mentality that stands behind today's most dangerous crises and tensions in the Middle East, Ukraine or the South China Sea. Geopolitics serves as a very attractive model, offering an understandable and logical structure of international relations, that can be regarded as a game field (Brzezinski's chess board) where actors are easily identified and scenarios are understandable. Some argue that geopolitics is a heritage of empire, and of a colonial and Cold War past, when massive parts of the world were understandably divided between the great rival powers. But the contemporary world is more complicated, because it is more diverse than ever before, including an enormous number of actors, and ruled by the logic of the market. Therefore, geopolitics has evolved in rhythm with global trends, so naturally such terms as geoeconomics and, largely inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein, geoculture have been coined.

At the same time, even though geopolitics may sound attractively simple in its ability to explain the complexity of international relations, very few

serious efforts have been made to give a deeper insight into what stands behind this grand narrative. This book by William Mallinson and Zoran Ristic is a great attempt to get into the core of geopolitics, to analyse the roots and history of its evolution both as a term, as a strategy, as an ideologisation and, using the title, as an 'obsession'. Armed with systemic knowledge of history and incisive language, the authors try to deconstruct the very meaning of geopolitics and show its real nature. For Mallinson and Ristic, history is a self-repeating continuity; in this sense their reference to Florentine statesman Francesco Guicciardini can be seen as a leitmotif – 'the same things return, but with different names and colours'. Historical periods and events are mixed in a very postmodern way to give a feeling of a general logic that stands behind the geopolitical mentality, which is much older than the word itself. Seeing international relations primarily through the territorial distribution of power by leaders and strategists has led the world to many disasters, recurring throughout the history of humanity; these disasters have served as lessons that were never learnt, although there probably never was enough will to learn them.

Hence the authors' attempt to see international relations through geohistory rather than geopolitics is a remarkable effort to escape from the oversimplifying geographic determinism. International affairs is a complex system of state interlinks that have developed through time and been influenced by culture, ideology, religion, ambitions, rivalry, behaviour, economic interests and trade, political ambitions and intersocietal relations, all of which stretch far beyond differences between the land and the sea and drawing border lines in Prime Ministers' offices. In many ways, geopolitical vision derives from military-security strategies that probably explain its attraction to decision-makers, but this vision *per se* does not help us to understand the structure of states, their societies and system of relations between them. Mallinson and Ristic are absolutely right when they say that 'clarifying international relations theory has never proved possible'. Battles between realism, liberalism, constructivism, institutionalism, Marxism and behaviourism are here to stay, because the world will always be unequal in terms of distribution of power and resources. But it does not mean that we should accept at face value such 'universal' approaches as that of geopolitics, which in the end does not serve as an explanation tool, but rather as a very concrete method to justify claims for power.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKEL	Cypriot Progressive People's Working Party
CO	Colonial Office
EAM	National Liberation Front
EDES	National Republican Greek League
EOKA	National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters
FO	Foreign Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SBA	Sovereign Base Area
TMT	Turkish Defence Force
UN	United Nations
UNFICYP	United Nations Forces in Cyprus



# ENTREE

## Geopolitical Correctness

The fashionable term ‘geopolitics’ is used willy-nilly these days, and increasingly so, mainly by international relations academics, think-tankers, politicians and foreign affairs officials, in the belief that the term adds respectability to what they are propounding. Sometimes, they confuse the word with ‘geostrategy’. More than sometimes, they even tend to use it to explain and justify illegal military attacks. Certainly, the term has entered the hegemonolinguistic terminology of globalisation, along with such simplistic terms as ‘shared values’, ‘shoulder to shoulder’, ‘going forward’, and the like. Some speakers can often be likened to auto-brainwashed humans who no longer properly understand what they are saying: in Orwellian terms, the right noises come out of the larynx, but the speaker is in a reduced state of consciousness, which is of course favourable to political conformity.<sup>1</sup> Many of those using the term have not studied its origins, let alone its meaning and implications. Once some of them do begin to try and understand it, they are attracted by world maps, simply because looking at maps is easier and less painstaking than reading words. As such, they remain trapped, albeit unknowingly, in a simplistic view of the world, a world where only the woods matter, while the trees become boring irrelevancies, let alone the branches and twigs. Geopolitics has – insidiously for many – been affecting the lives we lead to an increasing extent, aided by the so-called phenomenon of globalisation. Let us begin to define the term.

### What is it?

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, geopolitics is ‘a method of foreign policy analysis which seeks to understand, explain and predict international political behaviour primarily in terms of geographical variables, such as location, size, climate, topography, demography, natural resources and technological development and potential. Political identity and action is thus seen to be more (more or

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<sup>1</sup> Orwell, George, ‘Politics and the English Language’, *Horizon*, London, 1946.

less) determined by geography'.<sup>2</sup> That may sound fine as far as it goes, although it does not mention behavior *within* nations. Nor is space given to the human characteristics that give rise to political behaviour. More succinctly, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it thus: 'the politics of a country as determined by its geographical features; the study of this.'<sup>3</sup> One alleged academic of geopolitics views it as 'an X-ray of reality and thus the study of the distribution of power internationally, the four kinds of power being military, economic, political and cultural/informational.' 'This,' he says, 'implies the existence of geostrategy' or, as he puts it, 'political intervention to transform or intensify the results of geopolitical analysis.'<sup>4</sup> Again there is no mention of human characteristics, unsurprising, perhaps, given his academic qualifications in rural engineering and economic geography. Morality and people rarely figure in geostrategy, or, indeed, in its theoretical friend political realism.

In direct contrast to the above, we believe that the prime focus in understanding international political behaviour, in line with geohistory<sup>5</sup> (see Chapter Three), should be human characteristics. Indeed, we go further, positing that geopolitics, unlike neutral and dispassionate geohistory, actually restricts free analysis, constrained as it is by its obsession with the control of resources, which we believe to be one of the causes of war. Here we clash with the likes of Hegel, who appeared to believe that war brought progress.<sup>6</sup> Like several German philosophers, Heraclitus' famous saying 'strife is justice' seems to have been accompanied by a Teutonic excess of logic. The contention that war can bring progress seems to us too

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, Graham and Newnham, Jeffrey, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Penguin, London etc., 1998, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Eighth Edition, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Ioannis Mazis, interview with William Mallinson, Athens, 30 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> William Mallinson believed that he had first coined the term 'geohistory', until he trawled the Internet, and found that it already existed. Two precise definitions were: 'The geological history of the Earth or of a region; history as studied in the context of geography or the earth sciences.' He found only one serious paper on the term, in the form of a paper by Jose Luis Orella Unzué of the University of San Sebastian, written in 1995. Perhaps because of the hegemonolingual situation of English, and the fact that the paper is in Spanish, it does not appear to have had any great impact on current international relations thinking. His approach differs from ours, in that his paper concludes that geohistory is a new geography. Thus his emphasis appears to be on geography, whereas ours is on history. See *Lurralde*, no. 18, San Sebastian, 1995, ISSN 1697-3070.

<sup>6</sup> Gat, Azar, *The Origins of Military Thought*, Oxford University Press, UK, 1989, pp. 242-243.

simplistic and misguided: it may be true that land is sometimes burnt for agricultural reasons, to improve the next crop; but people are hardly to be equated with crops. In a materialistic sense, destruction of a large amount of Europe's infrastructure in the last world war may well have led to faster trains, while in Britain, with less damage, the trains remained slower. But slower trains can hardly be taken as an example of lack of progress. To put the point more strongly, does owning an I-phone imply progress? Not if one juxtaposes it with giving knives and forks to cannibals.

The point here is that advanced technology cannot have any serious effect on the basic human characteristics, other than inducing humans to move faster, with all the concomitant adverse effects, such as lack of space to properly reflect on one's actions. To put it yet more succinctly, even if seemingly cryptically: in order to think, one needs the space not to think.

So much for the 'technological development' aspect of geopolitics. The increased speed of communications today, allied to the dumbing down of education and a lack of analytical and evaluative knowledge of history, has led many to automatically assume that they are at the forefront of progress, without understanding what progress really means. Many of those in positions of responsibility have been brought up on a diet of violent computer games, that tend to anaesthetise their sensitivity towards killing and death. Thus it is that Mankind learns from what little of the past he knows, how to repeat his mistakes.

To return to our definition, let us consider the words of the US Air Force, since they represent 'geopolitical thinking' *par excellence*: American airmen are 'engaged defending US interests around the globe, supporting Combatant Commander requirements in response to growing challenges from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran [...] The United States Air Force continues to be the world's finest Air Force across the spectrum of conflict, but our potential adversaries employ increasingly sophisticated, capable, and lethal systems. The Air Force must modernize to deter, deny, and decisively defeat any actor that threatens the homeland and our national interests. [...] Our sister services and allies expect the Air Force to provide critical warfighting and enabling capabilities. We remain focused on delivering Global Vigilance, Reach and Power, through our core missions of Air Superiority, Space Superiority, Global Strike, Rapid Global Mobility, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance and Command and Control. We look forward to working closely with the

committee to ensure the ability to deliver combat air power for America when and where we are needed.’<sup>7</sup>

The above represents what many would consider to be ‘imperialistic geopolitics’, or what many now refer to as ‘meta-imperial’, since to admit that imperialism still abounds in our ‘advanced’ world is not politically correct. It is clear that the US armed forces still consider that America is the world’s only superpower, and that they believe that US interests are worldwide. If interests are to be measured by having over one thousand military bases worldwide (many of them taken over from former British colonies), then the US does indeed have worldwide interests, but mainly of a military nature. We shall discuss this in more depth later. Let us now introduce more precision to what geopolitics is, by looking at the history of the term, its early proponents, its temporary demise, and its resuscitation.

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<sup>7</sup> Presentation to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Airland Forces, United States Senate, 8 March 2016. Reported on *Russia Today*, in an article entitled ‘Russia and China closing in: US fears losing air dominance to more capable adversaries’, 12 March 2016.



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE POLITICAL POISONING OF GEOGRAPHY

### Introduction

In Ancient Greece, geography (a Greek word, meaning ‘earth-writing’) was fairly unpolemical, given that it dealt mainly with the physical characteristics of our planet. Several ancient Greeks are credited with works on geography, including even Homer. As mapping became increasingly sophisticated with the circumnavigation of the world, so the study of geography was taken more seriously as an academic subject, being taught at European universities by the Eighteenth Century. The German van Humboldt gave a big impetus to the subject, with his *Kosmos: A Sketch of a Physical description of the Universe*, published in 1845. Although the physical description of peoples was a necessary part of geography, the subject was still fairly unsullied by political ideology. In Britain, the first full chair for geography was not established until 1917, although the Royal Geographical Society had been founded in 1830, when the term ‘geopolitics’ was still unknown. So what happened?

Tracing the origin and meaning of geopolitics can be a thankless task, if one restricts oneself only to the plethora of clashing academic theories vying for prominence in explaining and propounding the term. We shall therefore adopt a simple geohistorical approach, to avoid the danger of trying to put human affairs into exact formulae, which only betrays a lack of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> We go yet further, by suggesting that the lazier the mind, the greater the tendency to categorise, and sub-categorise, ideas and thoughts, by creating so-called ‘conceptual frameworks’, with facts being cherry-picked and crammed, or stretched, into a Procrustean model, which thus becomes a mental prison. We shall use the detachment gained from the deep study of history, the past, *per se*. Our geohistorical method will

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<sup>1</sup> Yutang, Lin, *The Importance of Living*, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1938, p. 5.

manifest itself by default as we proceed through the labyrinth, before we set it out in Chapter Three.

Detecting facts form our basis, facts free from theory or ideology: in *The Origins of the Second World War*, A.J.P Taylor wrote: 'A historian must not hesitate even if his books lend aid and comfort to the Queen's enemies [...], or even to the common enemies of mankind.'<sup>2</sup> Taylor goes on to write that destroying popular conceptions and legends should not be seen as a vindication of individuals and states, but as a service to historical truth, and that records of history should be challenged only on this basis, not for the political morals which people choose to draw from it. This is highly germane to geohistory.

### **The First Doses of Poison**

It was not to be long before the Industrial Revolution, the economic growth mentality and the concomitant politicisation of the term 'geopolitics' were to have their deleterious effect on the world. For linked to this came new technologies, as the scramble for Africa and other parts of the world not yet subjugated by Europeans, was beginning, all of which, allied to economic rivalry and 'resource-hunting', was to culminate in the Great War. Although two world wars had already taken place (the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic War), the term 'geopolitics' – as opposed to greedy imperial thinking – had not yet entered the vocabulary. An American naval officer, Alfred Mahan (1840-1914), although he did not specifically use the term, is considered to be one of the earliest exponents of the modern geopolitical mentality. He emphasised sea-power as the best method of projecting a country's power worldwide, thus influencing a naval arms race.<sup>3</sup> His way of thinking still influences the American navy, as we have just seen above. Like Britain, he also considered it necessary to resist Russia, thus continuing the former's preoccupation with that country, when William Pitt the Younger had denounced Russia in 1791 for

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, A.J.P., *The Origins of the Second World War*, Penguin Books Ltd., London, 1964, pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Mahan, Alfred Thayer, *The Problem of Asia and the Effects upon International Politics*, Kennikat Press, Washington and London, 1920, pp. 25-27, 167-168 and 172.

wishing to dismember Anatolia.<sup>4</sup> The Cold War began earlier than most people think.

Mahan influenced a German geographer and zoologist, Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), who also believed in naval power, but concentrated his writings more on land: ominously, this follower of Darwin's theories was the first person to coin the term 'Lebensraum' ('living space), in an essay on 'biogeopolitik'. This term led to the use of the term 'geopolitik': the Swede Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922), influenced in turn by Ratzel, used the term. By now, the German approach laid particular emphasis on the state being an organic entity, thus implying that strong and growing states could break down borders in the quest to grow. War was thus on the backstage agenda. We think that it still is.

To add to the imperialist elements of geopolitics, and to lend an Anglo-Saxon flavour to Mahan's work, the Briton Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) threw his hat into the ring. This geographer certainly politicised geography, mainly through his near obsession with Russia. Although he himself did not use the term geopolitics in his famous essay 'The Geographical Pivot of History'<sup>5</sup>, he clearly injected British imperial thinking into his ideas. He was obsessed with German and Russian power and feared an alliance between those two countries. For him, Russia constituted the pivot area of the 'world island' of Eurasia. He referred to the importance of teaching the British masses, who were of 'limited intelligence', to think imperially.<sup>6</sup> The sharp end of his views can be summarised in the following:

*The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Wallbank, T. Walter *et al* (eds.), *Civilization, Past and Present*, vol. 2, Harper Collins, New York, 1996, p. 721.

<sup>5</sup> Mackinder, Halford, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, London, April 1904, pp. 421-437.

<sup>6</sup> Ó Tuathail, Gearóid, Dalby, Simon and Routledge, Paul, *The Geopolitics Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., Mackinder, 'The Geographical Pivot of History'.

and

*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the World.*<sup>8</sup>

The very title of the book from which this latter quote is taken – *Democratic Ideals and Reality* –, when taken together with Mackinder’s imperial ideas, shows how the study of geography was being infected with politics. It was of course the application of geopolitics – geostrategy – that was to lead to the two dreadful world wars. In this sense, geostrategy often becomes synonymous with military action.

Although Mackinder’s emphasis on land power was not adhered to early on, since naval power was considered to be of a higher priority, his ideas became increasingly influential, particularly when allied to those such as Ratzel. The idea of the *Drang nach Osten*<sup>9</sup> of the Middle Ages was back with a vengeance: the superior German race, with its natural attachment to the soil, would thrust eastwards, while the superior Anglo-Saxons would teach the world true civilisation with their superior naval power. The clash between British and German economic interests that was a chief cause of the Great War had as part of its backcloth the British fear of a German-Russian alliance, especially after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in early 1918, when Germany and Russia made peace. Let us now look at some of the less savoury aspects – at least for today’s politically correct pundits – of the imperial and racial underpinnings of the modern origins of geopolitics.

## Superiority

One does not need to read Kipling and others to suspect that the English establishment felt somewhat superior to many foreigners, just as the German establishment tended to. Perhaps, in a perverse fashion, the nationalism that grew out of the French Revolution had subtly affected even some of the phlegmatic English, notwithstanding their having been instrumental in Napoleon’s defeat. For example, Sir Francis Younghusband

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., Ó Tuathail, Gearóid, ‘Introduction’, *The Geopolitics Reader*, pp. 17-18. He refers to Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals and Reality: a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Constable and Company Ltd., London, 1919.

<sup>9</sup> The push eastwards.

(famous for having led the invasion of Tibet in 1904) wrote: 'Our superiority over them [Indians] is not due to mere sharpness of intellect, but to the higher moral nature to which we have attained in the development of the human race.'<sup>10</sup> Not to be outdone, a Liberal Member of Parliament, Sir Charles Dilke, considered America as the agent of Anglo-Saxon domination, predicting a great racial conflict from which 'Saxendom would rise triumphant' with China, Japan, Africa and South America soon falling to the all-conquering Anglo-Saxon, and Italy, Spain, France and Russia 'becoming pygmies by the side of such people'.<sup>11</sup>

Of particular interest is the fact that Dilke did not mention Germany. He could hardly do so since, bluntly put, the English are mainly descended from the Angle, Saxon and Jute tribes which invaded Southern Britain after the Romans left, destroying the prevailing Romano-Celtic culture. Thus, at least to people of Dilke's ilk, England and Germany were closely connected in terms of superiority. Here lies the paradox, contradiction, even: this whole way of thinking was to pit the English against their German blood brothers in two of the most devastating wars known to Mankind. But before focusing on the German brand of geopolitics, let us develop our English imperial theme, so dear to Mackinder.

We see the origins of the emotional side of the 'special relationship' between Britain and America, the latter being run by an Anglo-Saxon élite or, in more familiar modern terminology, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). While the American establishment had their indigenous 'red vermin' and imported Negroes as whipping boys, the British had their disdain for those south of Calais. Those readers of this book who happen to have attended English Prep Schools up to at least the late Seventies may well remember not only simplistic history books such as *Little Arthur's History of England* or *Our Island Story*, but fellow schoolboys using in a derogatory fashion such terms as 'Philistine', 'Jew', 'yid', 'frog', 'wog', 'dago', 'hun', 'slit-eye' and the like. Winston Churchill himself wrote about the 'schemes of the International Jew', referring to a 'sinister confederacy', and describing them as a 'world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society'.<sup>12</sup> It is not of

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<sup>10</sup> Huttenback, Robert A., *Racism and Empire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Irving, David, *Churchill's War*, vol. 1, Arrow Books, London, 1989, p. 20.

course only the English who were somewhat supercilious vis-à-vis foreigners: the French were to have their 'Croix de Feu' to compete with Mosley's Blackshirts, while the American Henry Ford's book *The International Jew* is too well known to merit further elaboration. We shall see later how these racial/imperialistic factors (that, oddly, were spawned by the Enlightenment) are still with us today, albeit in different colours, with the Arabs, as well as the Jews, being targeted, and how the likes of George Bush Junior, Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Cheney have stoked the fire. But let us now turn to Germany, that other member of Saxendom.

### **An Excess of Teutonic Logic**

As we have already intimated – and shall expand on in Chapter Three - , geohistory is predicated on human characteristics. The tactile Italians Guicciardini and Vico are, as we shall see later, closer to our views on relations between states than are some of the most well-known German philosophers, who appear to lay inordinate emphasis on German racial superiority and, in particular, power, the latter appealing to political realists. Nietzsche's thinking hinges on the idea of the *Übermensch* (superior being), much exploited by the Nazis. Hegel's view of history, approached in a coldly logical and intensely rational manner, promotes the idea of divine German perfection. Like some other German philosophers, he latched on manically to some of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus in particular, who had written that 'strife is justice'. Interpreting rather literally, Hegel tended to glorify war. Marx, who was more bent on Democritus, and therefore believed in materialism, replaced God and religion with society and economics, the fight being for the control of the means of production. We mention these political thinkers because, unlike Guicciardini, they politicised history, just as Ratzel *et al* politicised geography. The ideas of these 'geographical and historical' thinkers were to influence those interested in power, to the detriment of peace, culminating in the Great War. Thus we turn to the next (the fourth one) war and Haushofer, as the last of our 'early geopoliticians', and to the Nazi connexion.

## Mackinder's Disciple

Karl Haushofer<sup>13</sup> believed in Mackinder's heartland theory,<sup>14</sup> and, perhaps forewarned by the latter's ideas, therefore argued for an alliance between Germany and Russia. He was impressed by Japanese expansionism when a German army officer in that country. Promoted to major-general by the end of the Great War, he devoted himself to Germany's regeneration, studying political geography, becoming a professor, and directing the Institute of Geopolitics at Munich University. His closeness to Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, a former student of his, meant that his influence in military circles was enormous, and he was instrumental in forging Japan's alliance with Germany. Above all, his ideas were used to justify Germany's territorial expansion. It is here that we see the merging of Ratzel's, Kjellen's and Mackinder's ideas into a potent translation of geopolitics into geostrategy, that was to contribute to the Fourth World War.<sup>15</sup> Given the strong association between Nazi ideology and geopolitics, one would have expected that after the war geopolitics would be discredited and perhaps replaced by a less rumbustious approach to the world. Indeed, British and American academic circles, claiming – perhaps with a hint of hypocrisy – that Haushofer and the Institute of Geopolitics were using geography for power-political purposes, preferred the term 'political geography'. But this was more a matter of semantic pirouetting. For a time, at any rate, the term 'geopolitics' went into hibernation. Yet, perhaps bizarrely, it was to come back with a vengeance.

## Resuscitation of the Geopolitical Monster

As so often in US academic life, it was immigrants, believing in the necessity of American power, who built up the study of geopolitics. Nicholas Spykman, an émigré from the Netherlands, who taught at Yale University, was an early pioneer of the continuation of geopolitical ideas, basing most of his thinking on Mahan's and Mackinder's ideas. He

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<sup>13</sup> His later life was somewhat unfortunate. He was upset over Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, since that went entirely against his advice. His having a half-Jewish wife may also have caused him some embarrassment. He and his wife committed suicide in 1946.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<sup>15</sup> We consider that the first two world wars were the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic War(s).

slightly adapted Mackinder's definitions, for example by re-naming Mackinder's 'inner or marginal crescent' as 'rimland'. To the unity of sea and land, he also added the air. He argued strongly that the balance of power in Eurasia affected America, and that the latter therefore needed influence in Europe. Most significantly, he was concurrently one of the most influential founders of the realist/power politics school. Had he not died in 1943, he would undoubtedly have had a yet greater impact than he did, but he nevertheless made his mark with the publication of *The Geography of the Peace*<sup>16</sup> in the year after his death. Like virtually all geopolitical people, he was obsessed with Russia, and can thus be viewed as an early Cold War instigator.

It was political realists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski<sup>17</sup> and Henry Kissinger who took over the anti-Soviet/Russian Cold War baton. The former was unashamedly dedicated to containing the USSR, and worse, even advocating in 1986 the possibility of a nuclear strike on the USSR against 'its imperial great Russian component',<sup>18</sup> thereby introducing an ethnic factor into geopolitics to the extent of transmogrifying parts of geostrategy into 'ethnopolitics'. Kissinger, with his alleged policy of détente, was more subtle. Both academics served, *inter alia*, as National Security Advisers, Brzezinski taking over from the controversial Kissinger in 1977. Well before their political heyday, the concept of geopolitics had become inextricably intertwined with political realism/power politics. After all, the more emphasis one lays on the use and projection of power in theorising about or practicing international politics, the more attractive the term becomes to those who wish to use force. In this sense, the phrase 'power projection' is simply a euphemism for force and war.

As the Cold War progressed, the geopolitical mentality again came to the fore, coming into its own with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

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<sup>16</sup> Spykman, Nicholas John, *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1944.

<sup>17</sup> See Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geopolitical Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997. The title says it all. For a masterly critique of Brzezinski's ideas, see Fouskas, Vassilis K., *Zones of Conflict*, Pluto Press, London, Sterling, Virginia, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Malashenko, Igor, 'Russia: the Earth's Heartland', *International Affairs*, Moscow, Issue 7, July 1990, p. 52. Malashenko quotes from Brzezinski's 'Game Plan: a Strategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest', *Atlantic Monthly*, Boston and New York, 1986, p. XIV.



Paradoxically, it was ‘the arch-priest of the rational use of power’,<sup>19</sup> Kissinger (see above), a German Jewish immigrant of all people, whom one would have assumed to dislike Haushofer’s Nazi-connected ideas, who ‘almost single-handedly helped to revive the term ‘geopolitics’ in the 1970s, by using it as a synonym for the superpower game of balance-of-power politics.’<sup>20</sup> One can indeed argue that Kissinger, realising how controversial the term ‘geopolitics’ was, simply disguised his extreme realist agenda in the clothes of the ‘balance of power’, a balance of power that of course had many sides, one being that it could provide the US with a blank cheque to pursue its own balance of power, regardless of the aims of less powerful countries.

### Some Criticisms

It was undoubtedly a combination of imperialist ambition and a geopolitical mentality that led to the (mis)drawing of many of the world’s current borders. An obvious example is the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which led to all manner of future tensions and wars in the Middle East, which continue to this day. Needless to say, oil interests came to the forefront, and the Gulf States of today can be seen as Sykes’ and Picot’s children, just as the mistimed and clumsily implemented creation of the State of Israel can. Another example is the partition of India, which led to the killings of up to a million people, and mass migration, on the part of Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems. Today, the Kashmir problem is the sting in the tail of the geopolitical mentality. It is thus hardly surprising that some of the most respected experts in international relations are caustic about geopolitics. Christopher Hill, for example, describes it as ‘a primitive form of International Relations theory’,<sup>21</sup> while Ó Tuathail reduces it to the level of being ‘about contested claims to knowledge’.<sup>22</sup> To obtain some of the critical flavour, let us quote Hill at more length:

*The military balance and the economic league tables are intimately connected to a society’s physical patrimony. In the first half of the twentieth century some influential academic work on geopolitics, which we may recognize as a primitive form of International Relations theory,*

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<sup>19</sup> Hill, Christopher, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit., Ó Tuathail. p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., Hill. P. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

*produced largely<sup>23</sup> by geographers, suggested that this matrix had a decisive effect on a state's foreign policy, and indeed on the global balance of power. Various factors were identified at different phases of this intellectual fashion; when taken up by policy-makers they became semi-fulfilling prophecies, ultimately with disastrous results. All revealed the obsession of the times with a neo-Darwinian view of international relations as struggle and survival, which reached its nadir in fascism.*

*Of the main variants of geopolitical theory, Alfred Mahan was the first to influence policy, through his stress on the importance of seapower and President Theodore Roosevelt's subsequent decisions to build up the Navy and to ensure US control of the new Panama Canal (in the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903). The most malign, if scarcely intentional influence, was exerted in combination by the Englishman Halford Mackinder and the German Klaus Haushofer, whose contrary belief that power had shifted to those controlling great land masses, and in particular the 'heartland' of the 'world-island' of Eurasia, provided Hitler with some of the conceptual architecture which he needed for the policies of lebensraum and world domination. The madness of 1939-45 then discredited overtly geopolitical theories but it did not prevent ideas like the 'iron curtain', 'containment' and the 'domino theory' perpetuating the belief that foreign policy had to follow strategic imperatives deriving from the territorial distribution of power across the earth's surface.<sup>24</sup>*

Having put the term geopolitics into a chronological context, let us now consider where it is today, and why we consider it to be inadequate academically, and indeed in terms of ensuring stability in our world.

## **Then is Now**

While Hill is superbly succinct and incisive in his description of geopolitics above, he appears to be mistaken when he goes on to write that geopolitics in the old sense (until the end of the Cold War), will soon be a mere curiosity. His book was published just before the US-led attacks on Iraq and Libya, and the attempt to attack Syria, the latter thwarted only by incisive action by Russia. Unfortunately for many, geopolitics still seems to be all the rage. Nothing has really seriously modified since the alleged end of the Cold War: indeed, there is scant evidence that it has ended,

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<sup>23</sup> But certainly not exclusively; Mahan, for example, was primarily a naval strategist.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., Hill, p. 168.

unless one considers the end of the Berlin Wall and chaotic Yeltsin years as a temporary lull, bearing in mind, nevertheless, that the Cold War was/is more about interests than ideology, the latter being a convenient excuse to feed to the masses. As for Syria, very much in the world limelight as we write this, John F. Kennedy's nephew and namesake has said that the US decided to remove President Assad because he had refused to back a Qatari gas pipeline project.<sup>25</sup> The pipeline would have originated in Qatar, crossed Syria (sucking in its offshore reserves), and continued through Turkey to the EU, thereby competing directly with Russia's Gazprom. Thus the West's attempt to attack Syria was simply a continuation of politics by other means (to coin a phrase from von Clausewitz), or, more fashionably put, an attempt to apply geostrategy.

Shades of the above-mentioned Sykes-Picot agreement return here, to remind us that certain Arab states were created because of oil interests. Saudi Arabia, for example, which regularly beheads men and women (in public, into the bargain) and forbids women from even driving, is a child of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The fact that the closeness of this country to the West can be explained geopolitically (thanks to oil or, as we call it, black blood) demonstrates that geopolitics today has little to do with people or morality, but merely with interests. People become geostrategic fodder.

## Conclusions

We can now make a number of valid observations about geopolitics and how it is practiced. First, we need to bear in mind that although the term is little more than one hundred years old, its practice - geostrategy and the application of geopolitics - is as old as Mankind. What geopolitics seeks to describe, analyse, evaluate and advocate is not in the least new. It is simply politically motivated geographers and military people re-inventing the wheel by stating the obvious in new terms. Take Thucydides, for example: although he was more of a recorder of history than a geopolitical man, some of what he describes in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* is germane, particularly regarding geographical position:

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<sup>25</sup> Kasli, Shelley, 'Great Game and Partitioning of Syria', *Oriental Review.com*, 19 March 2016.

[...] *Athens herself would be stronger in relation to Corinth and to the other naval Powers. Then, too, it was the fact that Corcyra lay very conveniently on the coastal route to Italy and Sicily.*<sup>26</sup>

Since the invention of maps, strategic geopolitical considerations have been increasingly important in relations between states (whether pre-or post-Westphalian), especially in war. Although many wars were dynastic or religious, it was land, resources and trade that often lay behind the overt causes: the Crusades, theoretically fought for religious reasons, degenerated into land-grabbing, while Bush's 'humanitarian' and 'moral' attack on Iraq (he even mentioned a 'crusade') was to a large extent about oil. There is nothing new about geopolitics, other than the term. Over two hundred years ago, Napoleon Bonaparte stated the obvious, when he said that any state makes its politics to suit its geography.<sup>27</sup> What is new is the word and its various semantic refinements and sub-divisions, to take into account modern technology and new resources. Its cold and mechanistic way of approaching relations between states may be accurate and a reflection of the outcome of human characteristics and motives, but those motives and characteristics themselves are swept under the carpet; thus it ignores the true ingredients of relations between states, namely the human factor. Pure geography has been wrenched from the hands of geographers by political scientists. The boundaries between military strategy and geostrategy are becoming increasingly blurred, particularly within the context of power politics/political realism. Geopolitics is rooted in military strategy, with an emphasis on dominating areas of the world, which can be seen as imperialism by another name. Using the geopolitical mindset marches in tandem with the dark and selfish side of business and financial interests, which in turn further feeds the pursuit for power and domination. Nowadays, it attracts a fair number of lazy minds. After all, looking at maps is simpler than spending hard mental hours planning, surveying, hunting, locating, ravishing, analysing and evaluating original documents, and then trying to understand and write history.

The lazier the mind, the greater the tendency to categorise and create models. Thus, before we set out our ideas on geohistory in Chapter Three,

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<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner with an introduction by M. I. Finley (advisory editor Betty Radice), Penguin Books, London etc., 1954, revised 1972.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit., Malashenko, note 1, p. 54.

we now turn to the quagmire of international relations theory, in order to see where geopolitics fits.

