The revival of geopolitics

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ABSTRACT. This paper chronicles the revival of geopolitical writing and analysis in North America and Europe since 1970, after 20 years of decline. The revival is examined in terms of both language and substance, and the reasons for the revival are explored. As well as its role in the analysis of global and regional strategy, geopolitics has entered popular language and political discourse. The contributions of geographers are discussed, and the opportunities and dangers of the revival are examined. The importance of historical and political critique is argued.

‘When I use a word’, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less’ (Lewis Carroll: Through the Looking Glass).

... revival of the term geopolitics is probably premature and may remain so as long as most people associate the term with the inhuman policies of Hitler’s Third Reich (Pounds, 1963: 410).

Geopolitics are very big in Washington these days. I believe they were invented by Dr Kissinger, and they are certainly the last thing he thinks about before going to sleep. William Fulbright doesn’t like them at all, but the President absolutely loves them and plays with them all the time, or so we are told (Graham, 1970: 356).

... on campuses all over the country, musty old geographers are blossoming out as shiny new geo-politicians (Thorndike, 1942; quoted by Jones, 1959: 253).

Most geopolitical concepts now are academically respected, and political analyses based upon these approaches no longer encounter the Hitlerian geopolitik stigma once given them in the decades following World War II (Kelly, 1986: 162).

For most of the 40 years since the end of World War II, geopolitics, both as a term and as a form of analysis, has been in disrepute, and largely neglected in both North America and Europe. Yet in the last decade the term geopolitics has crept back into use, and geopolitical analysis of both global and regional problems has become more common. Since 1980 many books have appeared with ‘geopolitics’ or ‘geopolitical’ in their titles, the term is widely used in the media and political discussion, and is the subject of many academic and policy articles.
This revival of geopolitics has several different strands within it, and writers tend, like Humpty Dumpty, to make the word mean what they want, or leave its meaning ambiguous. The aim of this paper is to trace and examine this revival, and if possible to explain it. It should be emphasized that the sequence of decline and revival discussed here applies to geopolitics in North America and Europe, but not to the extensive South American geopolitical literature. The latter tradition has flourished and expanded throughout the period (Child, 1985), with considerable political impact, but because it has been largely unknown outside South America and has had little impact on geopolitical thought outside that region, it is excluded from the present study.

The revival of geopolitics is easiest to trace at the level of geopolitical language and terminology. It is important, of course, not to become obsessed by mere language, or, in O Tuathail's (1986) phrase, to fetishize geopolitical language and so miss questions of substance. However, language is a valuable entry-point, which enables one to trace different and conflicting usages, and this paper argues that the linguistic changes do correspond, at least in part, to real changes in substantive content and analysis.

The decline of geopolitics

A logical prerequisite for any revival is a decline from a period of earlier activity. This section examines this decline in the post-1945 period.

The defeat of Germany in 1945 and the death of Karl Haushofer in 1946 meant the end of his school of German geopolitics. The end of the war also extinguished the geopolitical traditions in the other Axis countries such as Italy and Japan, though these traditions are very little known (see, however, Takeuchi, 1980). The demise of these approaches to geopolitics is hardly surprising. More surprising is the decline of American interest, which had blossomed in the early 1940s as American writers, both geographers and political scientists, had discovered and analysed German geopolitical writing. Some of these American writers (notably Spykman, Strausz-Hupe and Renner), although highly critical of German geopolitics, argued that a realpolitik geopolitical approach could benefit the United States, not only in defeating the Axis, but in the postwar world. Others, such as Weigert (1942), were even more critical of the whole concept of geopolitics, but argued that Mackinder's 'balance of power' approach had considerable merit. Yet from the late 1940s such flirtation and enthusiasm had all but disappeared from American writing. Similarly the prewar French critical interest in geopolitics disappeared with the end of the war (and the death of Ancel during the war).

The decline of geopolitics is most easily chronicled at the level of geopolitical language and terminology. The association with German geopolitik was almost fatal. There does not seem to be any book-title in English using the term geopolitics between the 1940s and Gray's Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era in 1977 (with the exception of Sen's Basic Principles of Geopolitics and History, published in India in 1975), nor are there many papers in either geographical or political journals. Most are historical and critical, epitaphs rather than contemporary reviews or new contributions. When Kristof (1960) wrote his highly scholarly study of the history of geopolitics, he suggested, in a very balanced and thoughtful way, that geopolitics retained a value and that its neglect could be both politically and intellectually dangerous. The responses were very critical. Alexander (1961) argued that anything of value in geopolitics was encompassed by political geography, and that geopolitics should be abandoned 'completely as a working term, except for use in its historical connotations'. Similarly Pounds (1963) argued that any revival of the term was very premature.
This evidence of a decline should not, however, be overstated as a total demise. In West Germany the Zeitschrift für Geopolitik was revived in 1951 and continued, as a conservative international politics journal with limited circulation, until 1968. In France Admiral Célerier published his short Geopolitique et Géostratégie in the Que Sais-Je? series in 1955 (Célerier, 1955), and some English and American political geographers used ‘geopolitical’ as shorthand for politico-geographical (East and Moodie, 1956). But the overall picture of the 1950s and 1960s is one of geopolitics being avoided and relegated to the historical sections of texts in both political geography and political science, and the word itself having little currency in academic or policy debates.

This decline is, of course, at the level of geopolitical language, and it could be argued that whilst geopolitics as a term was avoided because of its Nazi connotations, geopolitical interpretation and analysis continued, but sailed under such other colours as strategic studies or even political geography.

To some extent this is true, especially within political geography. A number of geographers continued to review and explore geopolitical perspectives, especially the global views of heartland, rimland and containment. Examples are East and Spate (1950), East and Moodie (1956), Jones (1955) and Prescott (1968). Whilst this work retained an interest in Mackinderesque global perspectives, it distanced itself from both German geopolitik and geopolitics in general, trying to draw a clear distinction between geopolitics and political geography (a distinction political geographers have been trying to draw since at least 1905!), and to assimilate or domesticate geopolitical perspectives into ‘academic and objective’ political geography. At a period when geography had a tendency to be rather inward-looking and isolated from developments and theorizing in the other social sciences, the result was to depoliticize the concepts and remove them from public and political debate (though in the early years of the Cold War, East and Spate’s (1950) discussion of heartland theory was seen by Soviet critics, such as Semjonow (1955), as part of the anti-Soviet, German-American imperialist geopolitical tradition). A notable exception to this trend was Cohen (1963). Cohen’s study not only used the term geopolitics, but developed new geopolitical perspectives and related them to policy prescription. His work was, however, rather alien to the climate of the times, and attracted a good deal of critical comment from other political geographers (e.g. the discussion in Prescott, 1968), and its very singularity indicates the decline that had taken place in geopolitics. Cohen’s continuing work is discussed later as part of the revival of geopolitics.

Within the political science, strategic studies and international relations literature, the decline of geopolitical perspectives—substance as well as terminology—was even more marked. The Sprouts continued to explore man–nature relations, though in rather philosophical vein and avoiding any contact with German geopolitik (Sprout and Sprout, 1956), and it is this ecological perspective, with its successors in the global ecological crisis modelling literature, that is reflected in standard texts such as Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1981). The various recent geopolitical studies (e.g. Walters, 1975; Gray, 1977; Zoppo and Zorgbibe, 1985) also find little relevant literature, even under other names, from the period 1950–1970. Undoubtedly geopolitics continued to be taught in military academies and staff colleges, and occasionally this aspect surfaced in publication (e.g. the collection of articles in the USAF’s Military Aspects of World Political Geography, 1958), but again this generated little new literature, analysis or contribution to public debate. Overall the conclusion must be that geopolitical writing declined in both language and substance.

A further level remains for examination. The decline of geopolitical analysis, both in language and substance, does not necessarily mean foreign policy was not guided by geopolitical ideas. The United States policy of ‘containment’, which emerged in the late 1940s,
needs examination in this light. Giddens (1984) has argued that it is peculiarly difficult to trace the detailed influence of social and political ideas once they have entered general discourse and political practice: the consequences ‘are likely to be tortuous and ramified’ (Giddens, 1985: 350). Geopolitics is no exception to this. W. H. Parker (1982) has recorded how Mackinder’s terms ‘world-island’ and ‘heartland’ entered political language, and Mackinder’s general concepts were known to a whole generation of US policy-makers and analysts. There is disagreement as to the extent to which George Kennan, one of the architects of containment policy, was specifically indebted to Mackinder’s ideas (Parker, 1982: 192), but undoubtedly the Mackinder–Spykman literature of the 1940s contributed to the emergence of US policies of containment.

Gaddis’s recent history of US strategies of containment (Gaddis, 1982) interprets the policies of the different US administrations as being ‘geopolitical codes’, and identifies five distinct ‘geopolitical codes’ of containment in the postwar era. In particular, Gaddis links the period of ‘perimeter defense’ in the early 1950s following directive NSC-68 as closely related to Spykman’s rimland concept, and sees the entire containment policy as related to Mackinder’s ideas. This is in hindsight, with geopolitical connections once again respectable, and to some extent fashionable. The question must be, why, if containment was, at least in part, geopolitically based, was it not debated in geopolitical terms during the 1950s and 1960s? This is a complex issue, and has partly to do with the intellectual outlooks of the policy-makers and analysts (such as Kennan’s distaste for general theorizing), but a critical element was the emergence of nuclear strategy as the cornerstone of US global policy.

The emergence of nuclear weapons and the ability to project them by aircraft and missile over vast distances became not only the central aspect of US deterrence strategy, but seemed to make mere geography irrelevant. Neither distance nor geographical configuration seemed so significant. The Dulles–Eisenhower ‘New Look’ policy of 1953–1961 used the nuclear threat to deter communist aggression and expansionism (Gaddis, 1982). Under this nuclear umbrella, discussion of the geopolitics of rimland strong-points and heartland advantages appeared much less important. It was the nuclear balance that was crucial, and strategic debate became, and largely remains, a question of nuclear deterrence, arms race gaming and arms control strategy. It was this shift to nuclear deterrence and confrontation that, as much as a disreputable history, led to a decline in geopolitical theorizing. But the combination of these two causes had an undesirable and in many ways tragic effect: for almost a quarter of a century, although there was no shortage of specific comment and analysis, US global policy was not subject in public debate to any coherent, overall geopolitical critique. Equally important was the parallel neglect of Soviet global strategy.

The beginnings of revival

The roots of a revival in geopolitical reflection and writing lie in the changing international political and economic environment. The bipolar USA–USSR world-view and the associated policy of containment that underpinned US foreign policy became increasingly out of focus with the changing world. Decolonization, the rise of Third World nationalism (and later of Muslim fundamentalism), the Cuban revolution and growth of revolutionary movements elsewhere, and the Sino-Soviet split—all these changes, and many others, pointed to a growing multipolarity and complexity in international politics during the late 1950s and especially the 1960s. This was paralleled by a growth in Soviet military and naval power with some (albeit limited) ability to project itself well beyond the Eurasian landmass (for example, Admiral Gorshkov’s ‘blue water’ navy). The inflexibility of nuclear
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Deterrence when dealing with regional problems was also becoming more apparent, and the nuclear threat relied on a clear US superiority, which was disappearing by the 1970s. These political, military and strategic changes were also accompanied by economic changes, such as the rise in energy prices and the emergence of OPEC, which also reflected declining relative US power in the world-economy.

The revival of geopolitics lies in the response, by both analysts and policy-makers, to these changing international circumstances and to the increasingly apparent cracks and holes in the logic of existing US global strategy.

These circumstances might in themselves have been sufficient to revitalize geopolitical reflection, even if the term ‘geopolitics’ were avoided. However, in many ways the very decline of geopolitics in the period 1950–1970 provided good conditions for the rebirth of the term. Time can be a good healer, and many had in fact forgotten the term’s association with Hitler’s regime, or never knew of it, an ignorance helped by general absence of further historical studies of German geopolitics. In addition, memories of the Third Reich generally were fading, at least in the West. The necessary conditions were therefore present in the late 1960s for a revival of geopolitics, and these may have proved sufficient. But a key trigger in the revival was the extensive use of the term by Henry Kissinger. Kissinger’s geopolitics not only signalled the rebirth of Western geopolitical writing, but also gave it substantial impetus in new directions. Because Kissinger’s use of the term had such an impact, it is worth examining his writing in some detail.

Kissinger’s geopolitics

Kissinger became President Nixon’s National Security Adviser after the November 1968 election, and later US Secretary of State. As part of his rethinking and redirection of US foreign policy, Kissinger made great play of the term geopolitics. This use, by both Kissinger and Nixon, in speeches and writing, brought the term into the popular press and magazines such as Time, Newsweek, Fortune, New Republic and the Spectator, and subsequently into popular language. Full demonstration of Kissinger’s impact on the press would require an extensive media study and content analysis for the early 1970s. [Graham (1970) comments satirically that ‘geo-politics’ was in fact initially a typist’s error for ‘ego-politics’, which Graham sees as an apt description of Nixon’s politics!]

Kissinger’s use of the term needs some investigation. Several writers have examined Kissinger’s politics without mentioning his use of geopolitics, but emphasizing other Kissinger terms such as ‘linkage’ (Litwak, 1984). However, the role of his use of geopolitics appears most clearly in his memoirs White House Years (Kissinger, 1979), and two major review essays (from different sides of the Atlantic) have identified the key role of geopolitics in Kissinger’s perspective (Bull, 1980; Henrikson, 1981). White House Years contains numerous references to ‘geopolitical importance’ (p. 1265), ‘geopolitical interests’ (pp. 59, 1074, 1089), ‘geopolitical reality’ (p. 1053), ‘geopolitical challenge’ (pp. 125, 1256), ‘geopolitical ambitions’ (p. 764), ‘geopolitical consequences’ (p. 205), and many others.

As both Bull and Henrikson note, Kissinger’s use of the term is somewhat individual, and the geographical content of Kissinger’s geopolitics is not always clear. Kissinger associates it with global equilibrium and permanent national interests in the world balance of power. He opposes it to both liberal policies of idealism and conservative policies of total ideological anti-communism:

But an essentially geopolitical point of view found no understanding among those who conducted the public discourse on foreign policy in our country. (By ‘geo-
political’ I mean an approach that pays attention to the requirements of equilibrium . . . Nixon and I wanted to found American foreign policy on a sober perception of permanent national interest rather than on fluctuating emotions that in the past had led us to excesses of both intervention and abdication (Kissinger, 1979: 914).

and:

There is in America an idealistic tradition that sees foreign policy as a contest between evil and good. There is a pragmatic tradition that seeks to solve ‘problems’ as they arise. There is a legalistic tradition that treats international issues as juridical cases. There is no geopolitical tradition (Kissinger, 1979: 915).

Elsewhere he does identify such a tradition in America’s past:

Admiral Mahan’s perception of the role of sea power proved that Americans could think profoundly in geopolitical terms. The methods by which we acquired the Philippines and the Panama Canal proved that power politics was not totally neglected (Kissinger, 1979: 59).

The specific content of Kissinger’s geopolitics was mainly (though not exclusively) concerned with the desirability of new US relations with Communist China:

Equilibrium was the name of the game. We did not seek to join China in a provocative confrontation with the Soviet Union. But we agreed on the necessity to curb Moscow’s geopolitical ambitions (Kissinger, 1979: 764).

Peking’s challenge was polemic and philosophical: it opposed not only Moscow’s geopolitical aspirations but also its ideological preeminence. We agreed on the necessity of thwarting the geopolitical ambitions, but we had no reason to become involved in the ideological dispute (Kissinger, 1979: 764).

Kissinger’s use of the term is thus part of an attempt to turn American foreign policy towards a realpolitik (though Kissinger’s only use of this term is ironical) balance-of-power perspective. He is concerned to thwart Soviet expansionism, but sees US containment policy as excessively ideological, based too much on a military, rather than political, concept of the balance of power. Growing Soviet power had destroyed the earlier strategic equilibrium ‘an eroding of strategic equilibrium was bound to have geopolitical consequences’ (p. 205) —and with US relative power declining (as exemplified by the Vietnam agony), Kissinger’s aim was to restore a balance of power, but retain political flexibility.

Bull (1980) argues that Kissinger’s use of the term geopolitics has ‘scant regard for established usage, in which the term connotes a concern for geographical factors in international politics’ (Bull, 1980: 485). Certainly Kissinger’s writing contains no detailed geographical discussion, and he leaves the term rather vague, but the spatial component is clearly present, as the quotations above show, and the connections to the line of thought from Mahan and Mackinder to Spykman are reasonably clear. Kissinger’s perspective is, however, based on the need to derive a balance of power in an increasingly multipolar world. His choice to use the term does, however, raise some questions. Born in a small Bavarian town, Kissinger knew Nazi persecution as a small child, and he must have been aware of the term’s history. Henrikson (1981) argues that its use is deliberately provocative, to annoy his former liberal colleagues. An alternative view is that it was simply the best English word available (realpolitik has never really got into the English language). Whatever the reason for choosing it, Kissinger’s use of the term geopolitics does leave its precise meaning somewhat vague.
Kissinger’s geopolitics produced (or at least signalled) two different directions in the revival of geopolitics. It led, by example and reaction, to further reflection on global strategy in the geopolitical tradition. Secondly, and perhaps in the end more significantly, it popularized the word geopolitics, which entered the language in a way which it never had before, though at the substantial price of ambiguity and confusion of meaning.

The geopolitics of global strategy

The 1970s saw several attempts to rethink the geopolitics of US global strategy. Two notable, but rather different, examples are Walters (1975) and Gray (1977).

Walters (1975) argues that Western strategy since 1945 has been based on a geopolitical perspective, but an erroneous one. His analysis is focused on these false assumptions, rather than on the changing world political scene, though the latter is also important to some of his conclusions. Walters, like Kissinger, tries to map out a position distinct from both the idealistic liberals and the ideological conservatives ‘who have shown a complete absence of constructive thought over this period’ (Walters, 1975: 8). He argues that Mackinder’s heartland theory lies at the core of Western strategy, with its assumption that the Soviet Union has a superior geographical and strategic position, especially as regards Europe. Walters goes on to argue that nuclear weapons, and the strategy of nuclear deterrence, ‘would never have occupied their place in Western strategic thinking without the Heartland theory’ (Walters, 1975: 10):

Some have suggested that the place of geopolitics has diminished in the nuclear age. In fact, the place of the nuclear deterrent itself has resulted from certain geopolitical assumptions, and Western strategy as a whole has been imprisoned inside a global outlook which has closed the doors to reasonable alternatives (Walters, 1975: 12).

Walters’ thesis is that nuclear deterrence was given such a prominent role in Western strategy because the United States believed the Soviet heartland had overwhelming strategic advantage in Europe in terms of conventional warfare. This belief was, in Walter’s view, too pessimistic: with adequate conventional forces the West could successfully defend Europe against Soviet aggression. Citing Liddell Hart, Walters claims that advantage lies more with the defender than the aggressor. The remedy is a strategy based on good conventional forces, allied to strong naval power. Walters also believes that technology, and specifically large-scale ships and submarines, is shifting the global balance back towards sea power, and so favouring the West.

Gray (1977), in a study that has made more impact on the strategic studies community, also draws on Mahan, Mackinder and Spykman, but his interpretation is somewhat different. His argument is that US foreign policy has increasingly ignored the geopolitical realities of Soviet expansionism, and needs to focus more sharply on national interest and power politics. Many of his themes echo Kissinger, yet it is the policy of detente which is his main target. Like Kissinger and Walters, he agrees that an obsession with nuclear theorizing has obfuscated the continuing relevance of geopolitics, but Gray argues that strategic negotiations (such as SALT and MBFR talks) and the policy of detente have been based on the wrong assumption that Soviet officials believe in stable power relationships and equilibrium; in reality, Gray argues, Soviet ideology is remorselessly expansionist, and USA-USSR relationships should be viewed in terms of the competition of land power and sea power. If the USSR can achieve ‘hemispheric denial’ (i.e. exclude the USA from influence in the Eurasian landmass), and project its power beyond that landmass, then the battle is lost.
Since the late 1970s numerous other studies have revived the use of geopolitical perspectives on global strategy. In 1982 an International Institute of Geopolitics was founded in Paris, to ‘strengthen solidarity among the Western democracies in the face of the Soviet empire’s initiatives in pursuit of hegemony’ (Klein, 1985). It also publishes the pro-NATO journal Geopolitique. A NATO Scientific Division symposium was published in Zoppo and Zorgbibe (1985). This study both reviews ‘classical geopolitics’, and examines their applicability in the nuclear era. Zoppo (1985) in particular explores this question (see also Zoppo, 1982). Although ‘geopolitical asymmetries favour the Soviet bloc’:

... in the geopolitics of nuclear deterrence, technology has replaced geography in importance, while the psychological aspects of major power politics have gained the ascendancy in their strategic policies. Technology cannot obviously replace geographic attributes. For all that, the technology of the nuclear age has been so revolutionary in its impact on geography that it has practically replaced it as the basic factor of geopolitics (Zoppo, 1985: 153).

The tendency of this literature is to take a rather restricted view of both traditional geopolitics (excluding the Germanic tradition, and limiting it to global issues), and of ‘geographical factors’ (tending to limit them to physical configurations and space, and ignoring human distributions). It also tends to assimilate geopolitics to ‘power politics’, to give an overwhelming role to technology, and so to assume that geopolitical relationships emerge ‘naturalistically’, without the intervention of social and political structures and theories.

An alternative perspective, one that in the end may be more geographical, is given by Jay (1979), who claims that ‘Geopolitics is, definitionally, the art and process of managing global rivalry’ (Jay, 1979: 486), but, in Kissinger tradition, links this to regional politics: ‘Good regionalism is good geopolitics; and bad regionalism is bad geopolitics’ (Jay, 1979: 485). Other recent studies include Deudney (1985), the ‘geopolitical atlas’ of Chaliand and Rageau (1983), which begins with geopolitical world-views, and Freedman’s Atlas of Global Strategy (Freedman, 1985), which also begins with a consideration of geopolitics. Some geographers have also made recent contributions to the geopolitics of global strategy, such as O’Sullivan’s highly critical study of the geopolitics of deterrence (O’Sullivan, 1985), Lacoste’s study of the geography of the Euromissiles (cruise and Pershing II) and the risks of ‘decoupling’ European and American strategy (Lacoste, 1983), and Pepper and Jenkins’ study of the different geopolitical situations of the USSR and USA in terms of nuclear vulnerability and siting, and the way this affects their perceptions and fears (Pepper and Jenkins, 1984). The neglect of these issues in much of the other geopolitical literature is remarkable.

The popularization of geopolitics

Kissinger’s second legacy was to popularize the term geopolitics and the adjective geopolitical. This is less a revival than a new phenomenon. Since Rudolf Kjellen coined the term in 1899, geopolitics has probably never had, even in interwar Germany, this popular currency in the media, journalism and policy discussion. The difficulty is that, again as a Kissinger legacy, the exact meaning of the term is vague. This is, of course, true of many terms, not least ‘geographical’ itself, but geopolitics seems especially vulnerable. It appears as a disembodied term, with no known history, and can variously mean ‘global—strategic’, ‘ideological East—West conflict’, ‘regional—political’, ‘geographical contextual’, or nothing very clear at all. It is used to title magazine contents (e.g. ‘the Geopolitics of
Famine' was a *New Republic* title, but the substantive contents may make no references to geopolitics or geography. It carries connotations of hard-headed, no-nonsense realism, with the writer (and reader) facing up to 'geopolitical realities'.

This is not to say that all, or even most, studies employing the term are superficial or misleading. On the contrary, many are penetrating and perceptive contributions, opening up new themes. 'Geopolitics' serves as an umbrella term, encapsulating the interaction of global and regional issues with economic and local structures. But the term geopolitics often appears only in the title, introduction and conclusions, with no linkage to other geopolitical literature, and with the major analysis being conducted using other political and economic intellectual frameworks, usually with little geography and few maps. A few examples can illustrate these points.

Smith (1980) in *The Geopolitics of Information* examines the role of news, media and other information in the growing domination of the world by Western culture, commenting:

> We are beginning to learn that de-colonization and the growth of supranationalism were not the termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web which has been spinning since the Renaissance (Smith, 1980: 176).

The relevance of Smith's analysis to global geopolitics is clear, yet his study contains few other references to geopolitics. Energy politics and economics are of increasing geopolitical significance (though rather ignored by most global geopolitical literature), and Russell (1983) examines the growing importance of Soviet natural gas for the Western European economies, and its geopolitical implications. There is rather more use of 'geopolitical' in Russell's text, but the major framework is economic, and there are no geopolitical or geographical references in the bibliography. Harrtich's *The American Opportunity* (1983) argues that 'ecopolitics' (by which he means economic power, not ecological politics) will replace 'geopolitics' (based on military power) in global importance, and this will allow the USA to surge ahead of the USSR. Bullier's *Geopolitiques de l'Apartheid* (1982) is a very appropriate title for an analysis of the territorial logic of South Africa's policies, yet again the intellectual analysis and references owe little to either geopolitics or geography.

The use of geopolitical language has become especially prevalent in discussions of US foreign policy in Central America and the Caribbean. The Reagan administration has deployed geopolitical terminology and arguments in its policies (O Tuathail, 1986), though Republican policy discussion remains rather unconnected with formal geopolitical theorizing, with the influential and interesting exception of Ambassador Lewis Tambs and the Sante Fe Group. Other discussion of US geopolitics in the region reflects the vagueness of the term. For example, a theme issue of *Caribbean Review*, entitled 'The New Geopolitics', contains hardly any use of the term, even though it contains articles across the political spectrum. Other writers are more specific, such as Levine (1983) who contrasts strategic East–West geopolitical considerations against English–Spanish cultural competition as forces in Caribbean politics, whilst Black (1982) recognizes the 'geopolitical crisis' in Central America, and argues that it reflects the general decline of US power and the specific role of the American Sunbelt in Reagan's political base. A study by the Nicaraguan Gorostiaga (1985) is the most sustained geopolitical analysis. He also argues, like Black and O Tuathail, that US geopolitics in Central America is a response to declining world power, but goes on to argue for 'an alternative regional project' for Central America and the Caribbean, which must 'incorporate a new economic vision of geopolitics', based on a North–South context rather than an East–West confrontation (Gorostiaga, 1985).

Gorostiaga's study moves furthest in the direction of building a formal geopolitical
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Though it is somewhat heavily economistic—but the general conclusion about the diffusion and popularization of the terms geopolitics and geopolitical is that they serve as vague ‘umbrella’ terms for studies of regional political and economic issues, and their links to global policies and conflicts. The problems are real, the analyses often make considerable contributions, but the intellectual frameworks and theories have, in general, little geopolitical or geographical content. This literature leaves a sense of dissatisfaction, of searching for, but not finding, an appropriate way of handling these issues.

The geographers’ contribution

The involvement of geographers in this revival of geopolitics has, in general, come only recently. There are several reasons for this: the desire to dissociate political geography from geopolitics, the general decline of political geography in the face of the ‘new geography’, and a retreat away from worldwide and overseas studies towards intranational urban and regional specialisms. It is with the major revival of political geography in the last 5–8 years, and a reawakening interest in worldwide perspectives (see Taylor, 1985, for a reflection of both these changes), that there has been a surge of interest in geopolitics. In the last few years texts on geopolitics have appeared (G. Parker, 1985; O’Sullivan, 1986), together with lengthy reviews (Brunn and Mingst, 1985). The appearance of texts titled ‘geopolitics’ in both Germany (Hennings and Rhode-Juchtern, 1985) and Italy (Bonasera, 1982) is an especially clear signal of the revival. Another nice illustration of the sea-change can be found in the work of the French geographer, Pierre George. In *La Géographie active* (George et al., 1964), George rejected both the term geopolitics (‘the worst caricature of applied geography in the first part of the 20th century has been geopolitics’) and geopolitical analysis (see the discussion of this in Lacoste, 1981), yet in 1984 George published *Geopolitique des Minorités*, arguing the case for a geopolitical analysis of minority problems (George, 1984).

This revival has been made up of several different strands, and has attracted conservatives, liberals, radicals and quantifiers. First there has been a general willingness by ‘traditional’ political geographers to use the adjective ‘geopolitical’ where it would have been avoided previously, and to explore more fully the political implications of their analyses. Notably, Cohen’s pioneer work on geopolitical perspectives for a multipolar world, first suggested in 1963 at the nadir of postwar geopolitics, has been continued by him (Cohen, 1982) and by others, with renewed enthusiasm and confidence. Fuller details of these approaches can be found in recent reviews by Brunn and Mingst (1985) and O’Loughlin (1986b); see also the extensive general bibliography of geopolitics by Enggass (1984). Some of the contributions to global strategic debate have been noted in an earlier section. A second, rather different, strand has been the development of a ‘behavioural geopolitics’, constructing behavioural and statistical models of the international diffusion of wars and conflicts across frontiers. This is an approach being developed by both geographers (O’Loughlin, 1986a) and political scientists (Most and Starr, 1980). O’Sullivan’s recent text, simply titled *Geopolitics* (O’Sullivan, 1986), presents a blend of historical and policy-oriented discussion of global geopolitical issues, with more behavioural work on linkages, diffusion and game-theoretic approaches.

A third strand comes from those influenced by Marxist or neo-Marxist theory. Their theoretical base gives them a perspective for both a critique of earlier geopolitics (seen as imperialist rivalries within core capitalism), and for a reconstruction of contemporary geopolitics based upon economic relationships and particularly on the role of capitalism in the world-economy (Taylor, 1985). The analysis most directly in the ‘orthodox’ Marxian
tradition is that of Harvey (1985). His ‘geopolitics of capitalism’ derives geopolitical policies and conflicts from the logic of uneven development, and the search for a ‘spatial fix’ to crises of capital accumulation. An alternative approach is based on Wallerstein’s world-economy and world-systems approach to the development of capitalism and its geographical expression. This approach has been used by Taylor (1985) in reconstructing a theoretical basis for political geography. For Taylor:

In world-systems analysis geopolitics is about rivalry (currently East versus West) in the core for domination of the periphery by imperialism (currently North versus South) (Taylor, 1985: 37).

Geopolitics has found a place in radical geographical analysis as attention has turned from the purely economic to the role of the state and the political superstructure. Debate has increasingly hinged on the extent to which the political is genuinely independent of the economic base: thus Skocpol (1977) argues that it is precisely the significance of ‘geopolitical situations’ and ‘geopolitical circumstance’ (and Skocpol repeatedly uses the phrases) that Wallerstein neglects in his analysis of European capitalism. Similarly Giddens (1985) argues that Marxist accounts of capitalism and the state system fail to take account of ‘the geo-political involvements of state actors’:

...acknowledgement of the fundamental impact of capitalism in influencing global patterns of change from the sixteenth century onwards should not mean ignoring the role of the geo-political involvements of states (Giddens, 1985: 288).

One of the ironies of this literature is that its willingness to use the term geopolitics owes quite a lot to the legacy of Kissinger and Nixon!

This interest by radical geographers in geopolitics is not confined to Anglo-America. In West Germany, the text by Hennings and Rhode-Juchtern (1985) also presents a world-economy, economic-competition view of geopolitics as we move towards the year 2000. But it is in France that the most sustained geopolitical interest has been developed by Lacoste and his colleagues on the journal Hérodote (see also Chesnaux, 1976, for a French radical historian’s view of geopolitics). Lacoste’s work deserves detailed consideration, not least because it is little known in English-speaking geography, but a brief survey must suffice here.

Lacoste’s interest in geopolitics grew out of the impact of the May 1968 Rising in Paris and the radicalization (more Maoist than Marxist) of his geographical outlook. In his militant text, La Geographie, Ça Sert, d’abord, a Faire la Guerre (Lacoste, 1976), he saw geography as a strongly ideological form of knowledge, with major military and geopolitical applications. This ideology and application was hidden in the formal structure of the subject —supposedly academic and objective—and the objective of radical geography must be critique, not only to strip away the ideological smokescreen, but to develop alternative revolutionary uses for geography, a geography to liberate not dominate people. Lacoste and his colleagues on Hérodote (published since 1976) have given much attention to geopolitical themes, and in 1983 explicitly subtitled it Revue de Géographie et de Géopolitique, publishing theme issues on a wide range of global and regional geopolitical topics (recent themes include German geopolitics, Near East geopolitics, geopolitics of the sea, and the geopolitics of Islam). The (1985) revision of Lacoste’s text gives more prominence to geopolitics than the first edition, and is also somewhat less stridently radical. Lacoste’s analyses, and those of his colleagues, reject a Marxist economic reductionism (in fact they owe more to Foucault than to Marx), and give considerable emphasis to cultural variations. In common with the French geographical tradition, there is an impatience with general or
abstract theory (at least as a part of geography), emphasis being given to regional studies. Many of these studies show how detailed geographical analysis, when sensitively related to historical and political studies, can illuminate geopolitical questions. Lacoste also gives attention to the historical critique of geopolitics and geography, and the need to understand the separation of the two and its effects (e.g. Lacoste, 1981).

Lacoste's work is the most significant attempt to rethink the relations between geography and geopolitics. The contrast between Hérodote and Anglo-American radical geography is, however, striking. The Anglo-American literature is long on theory and short on regional or contextual studies, whereas the French tendency is the reverse. An integration could produce real benefits. Within the Central American context already discussed earlier, the studies by the geographers Foucher (1982) and Sandner (1981, 1985) show how a geographical basis can illuminate geopolitical analysis.

Opportunities and dangers

The revival of geopolitics offers both opportunities and dangers. Geopolitics deals with serious and important issues, and even marginally useful contributions as well worth making. A flourishing intellectual debate on geopolitics is an important guarantee not only against dangerously misleading geopolitical doctrines and policies, but can also help in the construction of more sensible and coherent strategies. However, the present geopolitical literature is very fragmented, with little cross-referencing between the different strands, and the term geopolitical is used in a wide variety of different, and often vague and ambiguous ways. The global-strategy literature often seems trapped in a few traditional concepts, ignoring wider economic and political issues that have a strong spatial structure, and uncritical of its political assumptions. It also structures its analysis in terms of ‘geographical factors’, often delimited rather narrowly, rather than in terms of ‘geographical contexts’. This focus tends to lead to either one-factor explanation or a rejection of geography altogether. The more general, popularized use of geopolitics is very vague in approach, often totally divorced from any geopolitical or geographical tradition, and whilst the contributions are often original and valuable, they seem to be searching for an appropriate framework under the general heading of ‘geopolitics’.

This revival offers specific opportunities for geographers. This is not in any way to argue that geographers should now attempt to hijack use of the term, or ‘reclaim’ it for geographers’ exclusive use, or under their exclusive definition. Geopolitics has entered general political language as a somewhat ambiguous but nevertheless useful term. Geographers cannot and should not attempt to stake out proprietorial rights, or attempt to withdraw the term from political argument into ‘academic science’. They can, however, usefully contribute to geopolitical argument, both directly in terms of public policy debate, and by clarifying and criticizing the analyses of others and putting forward their own alternative analyses. If much of the geopolitical literature is searching for an appropriate theoretical framework and geographical context, then geographers have much to contribute on both fronts. The general background to this contribution must be the current movement in human geography towards the injection and integration of geographical analysis and context into wider social and political theory. To be effective, however, this work must involve both theoretical development and detailed regional specialization, with a sensitive threading together of the geographical with the historical, social and political in a way that has not been characteristic of much political geography. The basis for such a contribution must be sound academic scholarship, but to contribute to geopolitical debate geographers will have to go beyond this, not only in terms of orienting their work towards a wider audience, but also in
terms of political argument. However, changes in both human geography and the social sciences more generally suggest that this barrier will not be such a difficulty as it has been in the past for political geographers.

There is a danger in the ‘new start’ element in the revival of geopolitics. The recent geopolitical literature on global strategy tries to dissociate itself and the Mackinder–Spykman approach from the earlier Germanic tradition, whilst the wider users of geopolitics are often ignorant of the subject’s history. Innocence has its virtues, but there are risks in this sort of historical innocence. Lack of serious historical and philosophical critique of geopolitics may not only result in reinventing the wheel, but in being caught in the trap of accepted myth and unquestioned intellectual structures. Some contemporary geopolitics seems content to base itself on a version of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’: an excessively direct linking of ‘permanent geographical factors’ with policy, with ‘technology’ transforming these ‘natural’ relations, but with little discussion of the social and political assumptions and models that are always involved in social constructions such as geopolitics.

Fortunately there are signs of a growing interest in the history of geopolitics. G. Parker (1985) has provided a general survey, and Kearns (1984) and Peet (1985) have examined the social and political contexts of particular geopolitical ideas, whilst in Germany there is a growing historical literature on German geopolitik (of which a single but monumental example is Jacobsen, 1979). Nevertheless, this remains a major field for future historical research.

There is also a second danger from neglect of history: users of geopolitics always risk having the subject’s past used against them. The West may have started to forget the Second World War, but the Russians have not, and in the Soviet Union the connection of geopolitics with Nazism and foreign aggression is retained, and the term geopolitika is used only in a critical context (Vigor, 1985). American discussions of the geopolitics of their foreign policy ought to be aware of these connections and interpretations. A recent example of the reality of this danger is given by Vitkovskiy (1981) in a criticism of a paper on the mental maps of American policy-makers by Henrikson. Henrikson was foolhardy enough to use the adjective ‘geopolitical’ four times, but it brought onto him a full attack on ‘imperialist expansion’, ‘the recurrence of geopolitics’ and ‘the growing threat of the United States to peace throughout the world’ (Vitkovskiy, 1981). The ‘Nazi card’ can also be played in other contexts. Cavalla et al. (1977) link the geopolitical writing and national security state of contemporary Brazil and Chile with the geopolitics of fascist Germany, arguing that the historical connections reflect logical, structural connections. Arguments against this type of criticism can be conducted only on the basis of detailed historical research and criticism, as can attempts to separate Mackinderesque ‘balance of power’ geopolitics from the Germanic tradition.

Conclusions

This paper has traced the revival of geopolitics in North America and Europe since the 1970s. It has been argued that this revival has its roots in the changing international political and economic situation, and the growing multipolarity and complexity of world politics. However, this revival is not a unified body of knowledge or policy analysis. It is very diverse. One strand is the revival of global geopolitical speculation, particularly as it relates to US global strategy. A second element is the popularization of the term ‘geopolitics’ and its use in varied and vague contexts as an ‘umbrella’ term for policy in a global–regional context. The growing contribution of geographers to the geopolitical literature has been examined, and it has been argued that geographers can potentially make valuable contribu-
tions to both the theoretical and the contextual analysis of geopolitical problems, and that this approach might provide the sort of framework that a lot of the geopolitical literature seems to be searching for. If such a contribution is to be effective, however, it must be much more historically and politically sensitive than many earlier studies. Hopefully, current directions in geography will make this possible.

An equally important task is the historical and political critique of geopolitics. Geopolitics must come to terms with its past, and examine the nature of its discourse. It is somewhat remarkable that geopolitics has not so far attracted more attention from those interested in social theory in human geography, for geopolitics is probably the outstanding example of a set of concepts originating in geographical analysis that has been absorbed into social and political practice. Having helped set the ship afloat, geography has some responsibility for the voyage and duty towards the human crew abroad!

References


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