On Heartlands and Chessboards: Classical Geopolitics, Then and Now

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By Christopher J. Fettweis

Christopher J. Fettweis is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tulane University.

Abstract: Every few years, scholars and strategists rediscover the importance of geography. Interest in the terrestrial setting of international politics has grown again in the last few years, with classical geopolitics, in particular, receiving a fresh look from a variety of angles. Scholars, journalists and strategists have abetted geography's "revenge" against perceptions of obsolescence in the face of changing technology.[1] This article discusses this most recent regeneration, evaluating the descriptive, predictive and prescriptive contributions of classical geopolitics, from Kjellen to Kaplan, in order to help determine whether the revival is to be welcomed.

Geopolitics, or simply "the influence of geographical factors on political action" is, in some senses, as old as the study of politics itself.[2] Aristotle, Plato and other ancients clearly understood that politics are shaped and constrained by nature.[3] But the modern age of geopolitics began just over a century ago, when Sir Halford Mackinder delivered his famous "pivot" address to the Royal

[1] In addition to those cited below, see Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012); Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); C. Dale Walton, *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Michael Lind, "A Neglected of American Tradition of Geopolitics?" *Geopolitics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), pp. 181-195; Gerry Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Colin Dueck, "Geopolitics Reborn," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, July 2013, https://www.fpri.org/articles/2013/07/geopolitics-reborn.

[2] From Jean Gottman, "The Background of Geopolitics," *Military Affairs*, Winter 1942, p. 197.

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Society of Geographers in London. Few single lectures had as great an impact on the development of the study of international politics in the twentieth century. With one somewhat counter-intuitive, revolutionary idea, Mackinder put the study of geopolitics on the scholarly map, and in some ways injected maps themselves into the study of world politics. Scholars who have since worked in the geopolitical tradition hoped to explain states' behavior and destiny based upon their arrangement on the earth.

Mackinder is often considered to be the father of geopolitics, but he did not invent the tradition. The term predates his lecture by about five years. It was coined by Swedish geographer Rudolf Kjellen in 1899, and the first lengthy explorations of the subject were undertaken by Friedrich Ratzel.[4] Mackinder's ideas were largely a response to the geopolitical ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the patron saint of navies worldwide, who argued at the end of nineteenth century that control of the sea was the key to world domination.[5] Mackinder countered that the most important part of the world was instead on land, specifically in the center of what was soon to become the Soviet Union. Geographic constants would bless any power in control of this "heartland" with the most advantageous position from which to project power over the Eurasian landmass and, ultimately, the entire world. "The grouping of lands and seas, and of fertility and natural pathways," he wrote, "is such as to lend itself to the growth of empires, and in the end of a single world empire."[6] During the interwar years, Yale's Nicholas Spykman gave Mackinder's theories an American twist, arguing that the "rimland," or the Eurasian territory that surrounds the heartland, was, in fact, more crucial territory for the would-be imperialist.[7]

Other early scholarship focused not on territory *per se* but other aspects of the geographical milieu. Ellsworth Huntington examined the role that climate plays in development and conquest, arguing that great civilizations can only emerge in temperate zones because national expansion is to a large extent controlled and determined by climatic conditions.[8] He and other early international political geographers felt that there had to be a reason why the strongest states were found

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[3] Ladis K.D. Kristof, "The Origins and Evolution of Geopolitics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, March 1960, pp. 15-51.

[4] Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1897). See also, Ellen Churchill Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment, on the Basis of Ratzel's System of Anthropo-Geography* (New York, NY: H. Holt and Co., 1911).

[5] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1918).

[6] Halford Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1943, p. 2.

[7] Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942) and *The Geography of the Peace* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1944).

[8] Ellsworth Huntington, *Civilization and Climate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1922, 2nd ed.).

between 25 degrees and 60 degrees north latitude that went beyond mere chance.[9] "It becomes almost impossible to assign limits to the influence of physical environment upon character," argued Huntington, and "history is the record of human character as expressed in action."[10]

At first, geopolitical thinking did not cause much of a stir inside American intellectual or strategic circles. Overseas, however, significant interest was generated by one of Mackinder's intellectual protégés, Karl Hausfhofer, who through association with Rudolph Hess rose to become the head of the German Academy of Sciences during the 1930s. The possibility that the oft-expressed Nazi desire for territory, or *lebensraum,* was being influenced by a mysterious new science, *geopolitik*, inspired many U.S. scholars to revisit and re-examine what Mackinder and geopolitics had to say. Dozens of mainstream international relations scholars turned their attention to geopolitics, many of whom at least initially agreed with Edmund Walsh, who wrote that in *Mein Kampf* "one can almost feel the presence of Karl Haushofer."[11] Only strong research programs could have survived association with Nazism; since geopolitics was fatally flawed from the beginning, it stood little chance. Geopolitics wilted under the light of increased scrutiny that accompanied this wide exposure, for reasons that will be discussed below.

Some have argued that Mackinder and Spykman were major intellectual architects of international politics in the twentieth century, heavily influencing the development of great power strategy during both World War II and the Cold War.[12]

[9] Nicholas J. Spykman, "Geography and Foreign Policy I," *American Political Science Review*, Feb. 1938, pp. 28-50.

[10] Ellsworth Huntington, "The Influence of Geography and Climate upon History," in Hans W. Weigert and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, eds., *Compass of the World: A Symposium on Political Geography* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1944), p. 179.

[11] Edmund A. Walsh, *Total Power: A Footnote to History* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1948), p. 42. See also Charles Kruszewski, "Germany's *Lebensraum*," *American Political Science Review*, Oct. 1940, pp. 964-975; Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942); Derwent Whittlesey, *German Strategy of World Conquest* (New York, NY: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1942); Andreas Dorpalen, *The World of General Haushofer: Geopolitics in Action* (New York, NY: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942); Edward Mead Earle, "Power Politics and American World Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, March 1943, pp. 94-106; Andrew Gyorgy, "The Application of German Geopolitics: Geo-Sciences," *American Political Science Review*, Aug.1943, pp. 677-686; Dwight P. Flanders, "Geopolitics and American Post-War Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Dec. 1945, pp. 578-585; Jean Gottman, "Geography and International Relations," *World Politics*, (Jan. 1951, pp. 153-173; and Ewald W. Schnitzer, "German Geopolitics Revisited," *Journal of Politics*, Aug. 1955, pp. 407-423.

[12] For assessments of Mackinder's impact with quite divergent views about his popularity, see R.E. Dickinson, *Makers of Modern Geography* (London, UK: Routledge, 1969); Michael Gerace, "Between Mackinder and Spykman: Geopolitics, Containment, and After," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 10 (1991), pp. 347-364; Arthur R. Hall, "Mackinder and the Course of Events," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, June 1955, pp. 109-126; W.H. Parker, *Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft*; Geroid O Tuathail, "Putting Mackinder in

"From Harry S. Truman to George Bush," argued Colin S. Gray, "the overarching vision of U.S. national security was explicitly geopolitical and directly traceable to the heartland theory of Mackinder." Its relevance "was so apparent as to approach the status of a cliché."[13] Haushofer has at times been portrayed as a major influence on the thinking of Hitler, the philosopher of *lebensraum*, even the "Fuehrer of the Fuehrer."[14] The actual effect of geopolitical inquiry on policymaking is less clear. Policymakers are rarely asked to explain what ideas were decisive in creating their worldview; when they are, accurate answers often prove hard to come by. Zbigniew Brzezinski was certainly well acquainted with Mackinder when he became President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, for instance. Yet, the degree to which images of the Heartland actually influenced his thinking is an open question. Geopolitical theories may merely overlap with policy by coincidence rather than design, reflecting obvious policy preferences rather than geographical insight.

The end of the Cold War—and the utter collapse of the heartland power—only increased the interest in geopolitics, as scholars and strategists sought advice from a wide variety of sources to interpret the new, confusing, enemy-free age.[15] Many works emerged around 2004 to acknowledge the centennial of Mackinder's speech, almost always in laudatory fashion.[16] Itinerant journalist Robert Kaplan has been the highest profile analyst to inject geopolitical ideas into foreign policy debates. In a recent work, he argued that Mackinder and Mahan and the others have been helpful during his attempt to "ground-truth the globe in the twenty-first century" much as he had done in the twentieth.[17] Kaplan regularly consults the

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His Place," *Political Geography*, Jan. 1992, pp. 100-118; David Wilkenson, "Spykman and Geopolitics," in Ciro E. Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe, eds., *On Geopolitics: Classical and Nuclear* (Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1985), pp. 77-130; Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988); and Geoffrey R. Sloan, *Geopolitics in United States Strategic Policy, 1890-1987* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

[13] Colin S. Gray, "The Continued Primacy of Geography," *Orbis*, Spring 1996, p. 258.

[14] Alfred Vagts, "Geography in War and Geopolitics," *Military Affairs*, Summer 1943, p. 79.

[15] See Simon Dalby, "American Security Discourse: The Persistence of Geopolitics," *Political Geography Quarterly*, April 1990, pp. 171-188; Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present and Future* (London, UK: Pinter Publishers, 1998); and Mackubin Thomas Owens, "In Defense of Classical Geopolitics," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1999, pp. 59-76.

[16] See the essays in Brian Blouet, ed., *Global Geostrategy: Mackinder and the Defense of the West* (New York, NY: Frank Cass, 2005); Paul Kennedy, "Mission Impossible?" *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2004, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/jun/10/mission-impossible/; and Walter A. McDougall, "Why Geography Matters…But Is So Little Learned," *Orbis*, Spring 2003, pp. 217-233.

[17] "By engaging with old maps, and with geographers and geopolitical thinkers from earlier eras, I want to ground-truth the globe in the twenty-first century much as I did at these frontiers beginning in the late twentieth." Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), p. xxii.

wisdom of Mackinder in his widely-read contributions to foreign policy debates.[18] Today the geopolitical tradition persists also in the scholarship on grand strategy, carried on by such major figures in strategic circles as Brzezinski and Gray. Outside of that tradition, geopolitics is much more commonly ignored than engaged.

Presumably good research programs ought to fulfill three goals: They should be *descriptive*, or explain the way the world works; *prescriptive*, or able to provide policymakers with advice regarding how to proceed; and *predictive*, since if they truly understand the way the world works, their wisdom should extend into the future as well. The following sections examine the geopolitical tradition along these three axes, and find it wanting in each.

Descriptive Geopolitics

All geopolitical writing assumes that the earth is the most basic influence on state behavior, because, as Spykman wrote, "it is the most permanent."[19] Geography is the starting condition for all international interaction, the opening hand states are dealt containing a variety of constraints and opportunities. Some are blessed (or cursed) with a rich supply of natural resources, good ports, arable land and temperate climate; others struggle with too little or too much rainfall, temperature extremes, mountain ranges or deserts, powerful neighbors, or lack of access to the sea.

Geopolitical writing generally does not employ the scientific method, nor typically express its arguments in a manner appropriate for coherent testing. Its theories are inherently unfalsifiable, unscientific and, therefore, were probably destined to become marginalized as the field evolved in an increasingly positivist direction. As a result, geopolitics as a descriptive research program did not survive the behavioral revolution in political science. The scientific methods, standards for evidence and overall rigor applied to the study of state behavior over the last five decades virtually eliminated any lingering determinism and nationalism, as well as geopolitics, from international relations.

The field has hardly omitted geography from its models, of course. Four interrelated variables have received the lion's share of scholarly attention devoted to geography since the 1960s: the position of states, disputes over territory, borders and the diffusion of war.[20] A review of this literature argued that except for the extensive research on the democratic peace, "few other areas in the study of conflict have developed such consistent, complementary, and reinforcing sets of empirical

[18] For example, Kaplan applies Mackinder's ideas to the 2014 crisis in the Crimea in "Crimea: The Revenge Of Geography?" *Forbes*, March 14, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2014/03/14/crimea-the-revenge-of-geography/.
[19] Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, p. xv.
[20] For a review, see Paul R. Hensel, "Territory: Geography, Contentious Issues, and World Politics," in John A. Vasquez, ed., *What Do We Know about War?*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), pp. 3-26.

findings" than investigations into the relationship between geography and conflict.[21] While there may be a direct relationship between the robustness of the findings from this line of inquiry and its banality—by far the strongest finding of this literature is that states are more likely to go to war with neighbors than non-neighbors, for example—it is noteworthy that its scholars rarely mention insights from Mackinder, Mahan or Spykman, except in passing critique.[22] Once political scientists began to take the latter part of their title seriously, they left classical geopolitics behind.

Critiquing geopolitics for failing to construct coherent theories of state behavior is not entirely fair, however, because although description may be at the heart of most political science, it has never been the goal at which the research program has aimed. Scholars of geopolitics have never tried to generate a coherent science of political behavior, preferring prescription, and in some senses prediction, over description. Surely, however, they are correct in pointing out that geographical variables are among the most important, enduring influences over states. As the chessboard shapes the game, so, too, terrestrial geographys provide the most basic influence upon the behavior of states. That geography affects international relations is not controversial; what is not yet clear, however, is exactly how, under what conditions, and to what extent. After all, there is a limit upon how much a board can teach about the nature of a game played upon it.

The Threat from Peace

Nearly all geopolitical analysis is founded in the tradition of classical realism and shares some of the basic assumptions of that school of thought, including that of an unchanging, conflictual international system. "The game of politics," wrote Gray, "does not change from age to age, let alone from decade to decade."[23] As a result, states are in perpetual, existential competition, which occasionally results in conflict.[24] Geopolitical imagery describes a world of sea power versus land power,

[21] Harvey Starr, "Territory, Proximity, and Spatiality: The Geography of International Conflict," *International Studies Review*, Sept. 2005, esp. pp. 388-89.
[22] The common-sense relationship between proximity and war has been explored, explained and proven with ever-more-sophisticated methods by, among others, David Garnham, "Dyadic International War, 1816-1965: The Role of Power Parity and Geographical Proximity," *Western Political Quarterly*, June 1976, pp. 231-42; Paul F. Diehl, "Geography and War: A Review and Assessment of the Empirical Literature," in Michael D. Ward, ed., *The New Geopolitics* (Philadelphia, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1992), pp. 121-138; Kristian S. Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, "Measuring Space: A Minimum Distance Database and Application to International Studies," *Journal of Peace Research*, Nov. 2001, pp. 739-758; and Paul D. Senese, "Territory, Contiguity, and International Conflict: Assessing a New Joint Explanation," *American Journal of Political Science*, Oct. 2005, pp. 769-779.
[23] Colin S. Gray, "Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future is the Past—with GPS," in Michael Cox, Michael, Ken Booth and Tim Dunn, eds., *Interregnum: Controversies in World Politics, 1989-1999* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 163.
[24] Gearoid O Tuathail, "At the End of Geopolitics? Reflections on a Plural Problematic at the Century's End," *Alternatives*, Winter 1997, p. 36.

heartland versus rimland, USSR versus the United States. Conflict, and the oppositions that arise from it, is a central feature of all geopolitical analysis. Where there is no such conflict, or at least the potential for conflict, the tradition has little to say.

By now most international relations professionals both in and outside the academy should be aware that the incidence and magnitude of warfare has been on the wane for decades.[25] These trends are uncontroversial, if their implications are not; it is certainly conceivable that at some point war will make another in a long historical series of depressing resurrections. For now, however, by all reasonable metrics, the world is experiencing a golden age of peace and security, at least when compared to any time that has come before. While this is good news for humanity, it presents a challenge for geopolitics. Not only does international stability contradict its most basic assumptions, but it threatens to render the tradition obsolete. Geopolitics, as practiced in the twentieth century, was far more relevant to states at war (or threatened by war) than those at peace. As Alfred Vagts observed more than a half century ago, "in war, the forces of the earth are stronger than in peace…hence, the soldier first and the civilian next […] must know geography."[26]

Since geopolitics assumes that warfare is a constant possibility, it cannot accurately describe a world virtually free of the scourge. If it is true that major war and perhaps even war itself are dying phenomena, then geopolitics has nothing to contribute to international relations. Kaplan certainly has recognized this problem, writing in his essay "The Dangers of Peace" that this outbreak of peace is nothing to be welcomed. In fact, he writes wistfully, "the Cold War may have been as close to utopia as we are ever likely to get." "Whereas war leads to respect for large, progressive government" somehow, he argued that "peace creates an institutional void filled by, among other things, entertainment-oriented corporations."

[25] The empirical and theoretical literature on this phenomenon is immense and growing, as one would expect. For some of the most up-to-date data and evidence, see Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report 2011: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, December 2011); and Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011). Summaries, extrapolations, explanations and analyses can be found in Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Virtual State: Wealth and Power in the Coming Century* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999); John Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1989) and *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading Power Peace," *American Political Science Review*, March 2002, pp. 1-14; Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2011); and Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York, NY: Viking, 2011).

[26] Vagts, "Geography in War and Geopolitics," p. 88.

Fortunately, for the geopolitical tradition, he concludes that "true peace and security, of course, are impossible," while adding that this "might be to the good."[27]

If indeed major war is obsolete, then so is great power geopolitics. Mackinder wrote at the tail end of the era in which his ideas could have been useful: the nineteenth century, when *realpolitik* remained the dominant guiding principle for state behavior. Looking to the earth for clues about how to proceed in a struggle for control of the world made sense in an age of conflicting empires, near-constant warfare and zero-sum games. Strategists would want to know where the most strategic area on earth is, because the assumption was safe that all states, as Spykman said, "other things being equal, all states have a tendency to expand."[28] Today, other things being equal, no state seeks to conquer the globe, and geopolitics cannot describe much about how they behave.

Predictive Geopolitics

Prediction is merely the extension of variables identified during description into the future. It deserves noting that the utility of prediction, or the wisdom of identifying it as a goal of scholarship, is controversial in international relations. "Despite the folklore to the contrary, *prediction* is neither the major purpose nor the acid test of a theory," J. David Singer has argued on behalf of the conventional wisdom: "The goal of all basic scientific research is *explanation*."[29] Nonetheless, many works by some of the top scholars in the field contain implicit or explicit predictions about the future development of the international system, at least in outline, with each vision unfolding according to the theoretical predisposition of the presenter. For example, Kenneth Waltz may have argued that his theory, like evolution, predicts "nothing in particular," but he also offered many specific predictions that seem to spring naturally from the assumptions of structural realism.[30] In fact, all of the major theoretical schools of international politics contain a healthy explicit or implicit predictive element; anticipating the future has always been one of the field's principle objectives.[31] Geopolitics has been no different. The better the theory fits with events of the past, logic suggests, the better it ought to fit with those of the future, as well. Among scholars there is a greater faith in prediction than is sometimes acknowledged. Even the supposedly skeptical Singer argued in the same work that, "a strong explanatory theory will—

[27] Robert D. Kaplan, "The Dangers of Peace," in *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post-Cold War World* (New York, NY: Random House, 2000), pp. 171, 174-175 and 184.
[28] Spykman, "Geographic Objectives in Foreign Policy I," p. 394.
[29] J. David Singer, *Models, Methods, and Progress in World Politics: A Peace Research Odyssey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 74, emphasis in original. Discussed also by John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Winter 1992/93, pp. 5-58.
[30] Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Dec. 1997, p. 916.
[31] Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," p. 10; Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies*, Autumn 1996, pp. 7-53; and Fettweis, *Dangerous Times?*

because it is better able to account for and explain the effects of changing conditions—provide a more solid basis for predicting than one that rests on observed covariations and postdictions alone."[32] Many international relations theories, while mostly descriptive, always have contained prescriptive and predictive elements.

The hard sciences hardly shy away from prediction. As Stephen J. Hawking has argued, "a theory is a good theory if it satisfies two requirements: It must accurately describe a large class of observations on the basis of a model that contains only a few arbitrary elements, and it must make definitive predictions about the results of future observations."[33] It is the predictive force, according to many philosophers of science, like Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, that "gives scientific explanation its importance." The "major objective of scientific research," they argued, is "not merely to record the phenomena of our experience, but to learn from them, by basing upon them theoretical generalizations which enable us to anticipate new occurrences."[34] Indeed the success or failure to account for new information is central to the evaluation of a scientific proposition, no matter what its subject. As Alexander Wendt put it, "science depends on truths being transhistorical"[35]; to Imre Lakatos, "mature science," unlike "pedestrian trial-and-error," consists of research programs "in which not only novel facts but, in an important sense, also auxiliary theories, are anticipated."[36]

Few research programs have failed to anticipate events as spectacularly as geopolitics. This is not for lack of effort, because anticipating the future has always been central to the research program. According to Geraoid Ó Tauthail, geopolitics is "fetishistically concerned with 'insight,' and 'prophecy.'"[37] The centrality of prediction has led to one of the long-standing critiques of geopolitics that it is by nature deterministic.[38] French intellectual Edmond Demolins, for example, argued

[32] Singer, *Models, Methods, and Progress in World Politics*, p. 249.
[33] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1988), p. 9. See also Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," p. 10; Nazli Choucri and Thomas W. Robinson, eds., *Forecasting in International Relations*; and Ken Booth, "Dare Not to Know: International Relations Theory versus the Future," in Ken Booth and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theory Today* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 328-350.
[34] Carl G. Hempel and Paul Oppenheim, "Studies in the Logic of Explanation," *Philosophy of Science*, April 1948, p. 138.
[35] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 69.
[36] Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 175.
[37] Geraoid Ó Tauthail, "Understanding Critical Geopolitics: Geopolitics and Risk Society," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, June/Sept. 1999, p. 113.
[38] *Harold H. Sprout and Margaret Sprout, The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs (*Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); *and Daniel Deudney,* "Geopolitics as Theory:

that if history were to repeat itself, events would unfold in roughly the same way, since inescapable geographical constants would continue to shape events.[39] Huntington believed that climate had transformed entire continents of people into listless dullards, ensuring that their descendants would inevitably be easily conquered by the temperate-zone (white) nations.[40] Kaplan's ground-truthing contains pages of disclaimers about determinism, even a promise to avoid predictions, then a set of predictions.[41] Among these is a repeat of his vision that the likely destiny of United States is dissolution into regional divisions, including a Tex-Mex conglomeration on the southern border and a "Cascadia" in the Pacific Northwest.[42] Geography is not just formative, in other words, it is essentially inescapable.

These examples represent exceptions rather than the rule, however. Overall this widely-held critique is unfair, since only on the margins has determinism poisoned geopolitics. Although it is true that on a cursory reading, classical geopolitical literature does appear to espouse the belief that geography was destiny, only rarely did these scholars believe that the chessboard actually controls the outcome of the game. Most geopolitical thinkers were not simpletons unaware of free will and of the basic human component of international politics. Even Harold Sprout, perhaps the main critic of the determinist streak in geopolitics, maintained that since contingencies have always been implicit, if sometimes not sufficiently explicit, in geopolitical theories, it is both more accurate and more fruitful to conceive of them as probabilistic in nature.[43]

The fact that the geopolitics research program was never as deterministic as some of its critics have maintained does not mean that it contained wisdom, or even was able often to satisfy even the minimum requirements of what could reasonably be considered "probabilism." In order for a probabilistic theory to be of value, by definition, its lessons must *probably* be accurate or its predictions must *probably* come true. The probabalistic predictions from classical geopolitics have proven to be consistently—and sometimes spectacularly—wrong. To take the most prominent example, today it is quite clear that Mackinder's heartland offered no advantage to any power that would dominate it. In fact, every line of Mackinder's famous dictum was not only untrue in the present, but never was true at any time in history. The

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Historical Security Materialism," *European Journal of International Relations,* March 2000, pp. 77-107.

[39] See Harold H. and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a Politics of the Planet Earth* (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), p. 268.

[40] Huntington, *Civilization and Climate.*

[41] Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*; the promise is on p. 129.

[42] Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, pp. 319-346. This chapter is an update of Kaplan's predictions from more than a decade ago (*An Empire Wilderness: Travels into America's Future* [New York: Random House, 1998]), in which he recognized patterns likely to lead to the break-up of Canada, the United States and Mexico during his first trip to the borderlands of these countries.

[43] Harold H. Sprout, "Geopolitical Hypotheses in Technological Perspective," *World Politics*, Jan. 1963, pp. 187-212; also Harold H. and Margaret Sprout, "Environmental Factors in the Study of International Politics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Dec. 1957, pp. 309-328.

most oft-quoted passage from Mackinder is, of course, his cherub's reminder to the victorious policymakers of the future:

> *Who rules East Europe rules the Heartland;*
> *Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island;*
> *Who rules the World-Island commands the World.*[44]

Mackinder thought that geography favored the Heartland power for five key reasons: the Heartland was virtually impenetrable to foreign invasion; technological changes offered increased mobility which favored land powers; the Heartland was in the central position on the World Island, giving it shorter, interior lines of transportation and communication than a power defending what became known as the Rimland; the Heartland was loaded with natural resources waiting to be exploited that could give the area the highest productivity on earth. And, last, the Eurasian World Island, being the home to the majority of the world's land, people, and resources, was the springboard for global hegemony. Every one of these assumptions collapses under even the most cursory scrutiny.[45] Never did a power who ruled Eastern Europe come to dominate the heartland, never has a heartland power ruled the "world island" and never has a united world island come close to ruling the world. If anything, at the end of the twentieth century the opposite had become true, since the world island often seems to be more influenced by the Western Hemisphere than the reverse. The real Heartland, if there is one, is the United States.

Geopolitical theories have always been expressly future-oriented, and they consistently have envisioned a future that has failed to materialize. The work of the few modern scholars and practitioners of geopolitics, like Gray, Brzezinski and Kaplan, has suffered from the same catastrophic flaws.[46] For example, although most international relations scholars failed to predict the end of the Cold War, analyses based upon geopolitical foundations proved particularly imprescient. The first sentence of Brzezinski's 1986 work contained his "central proposition," that "the American-Soviet contest is not some temporary aberration but a historical rivalry that will long endure," since it was fueled by immutable, geopolitical

[44] No work that discusses Mackinder is permitted to omit these lines. Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York, NY: H. Holt and Co., 1962), p. 150.
[45] Cursory scrutiny is supplied by Christopher J. Fettweis, "Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics and Policymaking in the 21st Century," *Parameters*, Summer 2000, pp. 58-71.
[46] Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era: Heartland, Rimlands, and the Technological Revolution* (New York, NY: Crane, Russak & Co., Inc., 1977);*The Geopolitics of Superpower* and "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics a Hundred Years On," *Comparative Strategy*, Jan-March 2004, pp. 9-25; Zbigniew Brzezinksi, *Game Plan: A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest* (New York, NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), and *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997).

realities.[47] Gray, more impressed by eternalities of Mackinderian sea power vs. land power competition than by Gorbachev-era reforms, wrote in 1988 that "an easing of tensions symbolized by limited agreements for limited purposes must not be permitted to mislead Western polities into believing that a basic settlement of differences is possible between East and West."[48] The Cold War, in his estimation, was a permanent condition. Once that permanence had proven to be greatly exaggerated, rather than admit potential flaws in his basic assumptions, Gray predicted that geography would soon compel the United States to intervene in Eurasia "for the purpose of supporting Russia and possibly Britain…against a great continental bloc led by Germany, and probably allied with China."[49] Over and over again, geopolitical analysis has failed to satisfy the minimum requirements for what might be thought of as probabilism.

As the record of failed geopolitical predictions grew throughout the century, so did a justified skepticism about the wisdom of the assumptions and lessons of the research program. It is not so much a matter of lack of supporting evidence as a preponderance of the contradictory that makes continued belief in Mackinderian geopolitics inexplicable. When new geopolitical theories emerge, concerning, for example, the geopolitics of space ("astropolitik") or the "infosphere," why should anyone pay attention, knowing that throughout its history the assessments of the geopolitical research program have proven to be so remarkably and consistently wrong?[50] Its contributions to the study of world politics are likely to remain marginal unless its few remaining adherents can demonstrate what wisdom is contained in their geographical interpretation of international politics, and until they can escape from the improbablism of their predecessors.

Prescriptive Geopolitics or *Geostrategy*

Mackinder's ideas were explicitly policy-oriented, as has been the tradition they founded. Throughout its history, geopolitics has never been content to be merely a description of state behavior. More than almost any other intellectual tradition in international relations, it always has focused on prescriptions for foreign policy. Mackinder's target audience was on Downing Street, and then at Versailles; Haushofer wanted to help create successful policy for the Reich; Brzezinski seeks to shape American action on the "grand chessboard" of Eurasia. As the title of a Mackinder biography points out, geopolitics has always been "an aid to statecraft."[51]

[47] Brzezinksi, *The Grand Chessboard*, p. xiii.
[48] Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower*, p. 194.
[49] Colin S. Gray, "Back to the Future: Russia and the Balance of Power," *Global Affairs*, Summer 1992, p. 51.
[50] Everett C. Dolman, *Astropolitik: Classical Geopolitics in the Space Age* (New York, NY: Frank Cass, 2001); David J. Lonsdale, "Information Power: Strategy, Geopolitics and the Fifth Dimension," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, June/Sept. 1999, pp. 137-177.
[51] W. H. Parker, *Mackinder: Geography as an Aid to Statecraft* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). For more on this, see Ó Tuathail, "Understanding Critical Geopolitics."

From one perspective, the fact that geopolitics attempts to affect the world outside of the ivory tower could be considered its great strength, one that makes it worthy of so much discussion. Policy decisions informed by flawed theories are unlikely to lead to optimal strategic outcomes, however. The few remaining devotees of geopolitics stubbornly refuse to recognize the changes that have occurred in the international system and, as a result, have generated policy prescriptions that are outdated, at best, and pathological, at worst.

In the academy, the policy orientation of geopolitics led to a widespread and well-justified belief that its lessons and conclusions are, at least in part, based upon national partisanship and ideology.[52] To the scholars in this tradition, geography acts more like abstract painting than the basis for a science, since the earth's lessons are open to a great deal of interpretation and are quite susceptible to conscious or unconscious manipulation, according to previously-held belief. For example, since Mackinder was an imperialist, protectionist patriot, it is no coincidence that he developed theories primarily concerned with rising threats to the empire, and that his theories demonstrated, among other things, the geographical necessity of tariffs.[53] His later discussion of the importance of the "Midland Ocean" was little more than a fancy argument for creating a transatlantic alliance.[54]

Haushofer's theories and the entire Nazi concept of *lebensraum* overlapped nicely with, and provided further (pseudo)intellectual justification for, long-standing German imperial designs on the East. Cold War analysts who cited Spykman's concerns about the importance of the rimland may well have been using the theories to bolster previously-held beliefs about containment.[55] And when Brzezinksi warned of the inherent advantages of the heartland power, one cannot help but wonder how much his long-held opinions of Russia shaped his perception of the threat.

The intellectual context of Mackinder's time is sometimes lost on those who followed him. The notion of the "key position" on the battlefield, which was a crucial concept to Napoleonic-era military strategy, was experiencing a bit of a revival at the turn of the last century.[56] The Heartland, the key position on the battlefield of the world island, is essentially an extension of military tactics to the grand strategic level. Mackinder looked at his Mercator Projection as if it were a "Risk" game board and, armed with four decades of experience in geography, identified where he thought the key position would be, were all things equal. Mackinder, thus, invented what would perhaps better be considered *geostrategy*, which

[52] Richard Hartshorne, "Recent Developments in Political Geography I," *American Political Science Review*, Oct. 1935, pp. 785-804; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
[53] R. Mayhew, "Halford Mackinder's 'New' Political Geography and the Geographic Tradition," *Political Geography*, Aug. 2000, pp. 771-791.
[54] Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace."
[55] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982).
[56] See Vagts, "Geography in War and Geopolitics," esp. p. 85.

envisions the entire world as a battlefield and tries to find the most advantageous position during the inevitable and on-going struggle for global dominance. The smaller, weaker states of the periphery are of geo-strategic importance only to the extent that they influence the actions of the great powers.

Two observations should help guide an analysis of the utility of geopolitics for strategy. First, perhaps the most fundamental failure of geostrategy across the century has been its inability to recognize the extent to which technology has allowed humanity to overcome the constraints applied by the earth. This critique was first raised moments after Mackinder finished his famous lecture. A British political scientist in the audience that day, Leopold Amery, suggested that with advancements in technology, "a great deal of this geographical speculation must lose its importance. […] The successful powers," of the future, he maintained, would be "those which have the greatest industrial basis." It would "not matter whether they were in the center of a continent or on an island; those people who have the industrial power and the power of invention and of science will be able to defeat all others."[57] Amery would not be the last to raise such an objection. "In geopolitical speculation," wrote Sprout, "there exists a tendency to assume that the scientific and technological revolution has just about run its course."[58] The Sprouts considered the failure to account for the pace of technological change to be universal in geopolitics, noting that most geopolitical hypotheses rapidly became outdated by the march of events.[59] With each advance in transportation, geopolitics loses more of its ability to explain international behavior. Today planes can transport passengers across the Atlantic in less time than it took Mackinder to steam across the English Channel; missiles can be launched in the Urals and hit targets in the Amazon with pinpoint precision in less than an hour; jets can take off in Missouri, deliver a bomb load in Kosovo, and land back home.

Technology has not rendered geography relevant for *how* wars are fought, but it has affected the decisions about *why*. In other words, as a general rule, *the importance of geography to strategy is inversely related to the level of analysis*: the lower the level, the more self-evidently useful geography can be. In strategic studies, for example, successful tactics demand familiarity with the terrain, and on operational and strategic levels geographical knowledge can still prove decisive.[60] For the makers of grand strategy, however, geographical constraints are not nearly as important to decision making. States have fought in deserts and on mountains, in jungles and plains, on islands and inland. The geographic make-up of Vietnam was far more important to the decisions of the squad leader than to those of the

[57] Incident related by Sprout, in "Geopolitical Hypotheses in Technological Perspective," p. 195.
[58] Sprout, "Geopolitical Hypotheses in Technological Perspective," p. 202.
[59] Harold H. Sprout and Margaret Sprout, "Geography and International Politics in an Era of Revolutionary Change," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, March 1960, pp. 145-161. See also, Desmond Ball, "Modern Technology and Geopolitics," in Ciro E. Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe, eds., *On Geopolitics*, pp. 171-200.
[60] Williamson Murray, "Some Thoughts on War and Geography," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, June/Sept. 1999, pp. 201-217.

policymakers in Washington. While the terrain shaped the tactics, the war itself would have been fought presumably no matter what constraints Southeast Asian geography placed on its conduct.

Human ingenuity has proven to be more than a match for terrestrial constraints. Over time, the impact of geography on state behavior will probably shrink further, to the point that it may not be even important, much less decisive. Geographer John Agnew summarized this argument eloquently, if in dissent: "As speed conquers time, terrestrial space ceases to have significance."[61] Far from being destiny, in 2015, geography is largely scenery, all but irrelevant to the most important issues of grand strategy.

Second, and more importantly for the design of grand strategy, geopolitical analysis has from the beginning tended to encourage belligerent behavior. Lord Salisbury, who was England's Prime Minister until only a few years before Mackinder's visit to the Royal Society, once observed that "the constant study of maps is apt to disturb men's reasoning powers," and that his strategists "would like to annex the moon in order to prevent its being appropriated by the planet Mars."[62] It is no coincidence that cartography arose as a field in close association with professional militaries, beginning in earnest with the Prussian general staff in the nineteenth century.[63] Indeed there appears to be something about maps that encourages the emergence of competitive, even belligerent, strategies. Staring at maps seems to promote the idea that the geopolitical system is a zero-sum game, Risk writ large, where the object is not to coexist but to dominate, to defeat rather than cooperate. When Kaplan asserts that "the aim of geopolitics is to achieve a balance of power," he fundamentally misreads the texts.[64] Mackinder and Spykman, in particular, discussed balance, but only for other countries; the only structure they were interested for their homelands was one of positive imbalance. Balance is always threatened by growth in the other side, which threatens our dominance.

Such calculations re-emerge whenever geopolitics is reborn, as it is every decade or so: Brzesinski's world is a "grand chessboard"; Gray envisions "another bloody century;" Kaplan is perpetually anticipating "coming anarchy" and the impending implosion of virtually every state he visits, including the United States. When Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes report that Chinese analysts and bloggers are discussing Mahan, the implications are ominous because the Mahanian tradition, like all geopolitics, is competitive and conflictual.[65] To the extent that geopolitics acts as an aid to statecraft, it counsels bad choices and unnecessarily belligerent

[61] John A. Agnew, "Global Political Geography Beyond Geopolitics," *International Studies Review*, Spring 2000, p. 93.
[62] Quoted by Ronald Hyam, "The Partition of Africa," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1964), p. 161.
[63] See Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, forthcoming 2015).
[64] Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, p. 61.
[65] Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

strategy. Were leaders to listen to Gray and Kaplan, the encouraging trends in international relations would soon be reversed.

Conclusion

One of the oft-articulated weaknesses of international relations is its inability to settle questions, or to advance research questions to anyone's satisfaction.[66] Despite multiple productive research lines and fruitful decades of debate, rarely are minds changed or knowledge advanced. Geopolitics, however, provides an exception. Its inability either to articulate a coherent agenda, to provide empirical support for its ideas, to advance our understanding of international politics, or to generate sagacious policy recommendations has relegated the would-be subfield to the periphery. In this case the analytical process functioned exactly as one would hope. The critic who complains that international relations does not move forward, or that knowledge does not accumulate, ought to be invited to compare the textbooks of the 1940s to those of today, with specific reference to their treatment of geography. One of political science's main goals—to separate the plausible fallacies from truth—has been, in this case, well accomplished.

Yet geopolitics keeps returning. Perhaps it is only natural to seek solace from the eternal and the immutable in a world of constant, accelerating change. Perhaps in some ways the belief in the importance of geography is an understandable reaction to the intellectual and social upheaval caused by rapid globalization and technological evolution. Geopolitics, which has at its foundation constants like the mountains and seas, can provide the strategist a measure of comfort amid rapid societal change. To its adherents, geopolitics assures the existence of a set of realities immune to the pace of events, which may help account for some of its continuing, if limited, appeal. Overall, however, the interaction between geography and state behavior has produced a surprisingly barren intellectual landscape. Everyone agrees that geography matters, often in quite obvious ways—but determining exactly how the chessboard affects the game has proven elusive, despite more than a century of effort.

Perhaps we simply have reached the limits of what the earth can teach us. Those political scientists who insist upon bowing at the altar of multi-disciplinarity should be aware that, after a century of investigation, examining the board upon which international politics is played has yet to produce much reason to divert our primary attention away from the human interaction that takes place above. The time may be approaching rapidly when political geographers will be forced to either redefine the process by which an understanding of terrestrial constants helps advance basic understandings of international politics, or watch their research programs slide further into irrelevance.

[66] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979), p. 18.