

Everyone is Talking About It, but What is Geopolitics?

Written by Colin Flint

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COLIN FLINT, JUL 7 2024

The word geopolitics is commonplace. This should give us cause for concern, because the common usage is a form classic geopolitics that dates to the late 1800's and fueled national rhetoric and militarization in the buildup to the two world wars. We cannot deny the contemporary global context of tensions between US and China, and a proxy war between Russia and the West being waged in Ukraine. However, the onus is upon us to understand the world in way that does not use classic geopolitics analysis, for such a choice will reinforce a world of us versus them and an emphasis that "our" military actions are necessary and just I response to "their" aggression. Resorting to classic geopolitics language and analysis will reify the politics of war. What is needed is a new understanding of geopolitics that promotes a global picture of political and economic relations rather than a national mission. A global understanding of seapower informs this new definition and allows us to see how geopolitics can be a guide towards peace rather than war.

The Problem with Classical Geopolitics

The classic use of geopolitics that emerged in the late nineteenth century is **not** a good way to figure out the world's problems. It was not even designed for that purpose. Classic geopolitics is part of the problem and not the solution. It was designed to make an argument for why and how a particular country should compete with other countries. Different scholars proposed geopolitical ideas to make their own country stronger, and more likely to win wars. They usually hid these national security strategies behind impressive scholarly ideas.

Sir Halford Mackinder's "heartland" or the still relevant identification of an "Axis of Evil" are examples in which a seemingly clear and unarguable influence of geography is given explanatory power. Mackinder provided a simplified world history to support his argument. Such classic geopolitical ideas never go out of fashion; the deterministic use of geography is surprisingly malleable to new historic contexts. They are deterministic nonetheless, and their popularity lies in their ability to provide simple explanations based on the argument that geography doesn't change. But the meaning and ability to use or control geography does change. Classic geopolitical explanations are used because they *avoid* the need to understand and explain complex relationships.

Foreign policy elites and associated academics will continue to parade the simplifications of classic geopolitics to justify foreign policy. I believe we have a responsibility to explain in an objective way that does not promote national agendas. Hence, simple classic geopolitics explanations of geopolitics are inadequate. Instead, a sequence of building blocks – which I explore in more detail in my forthcoming book – create a definition of geopolitics with explanatory and practical value. This definition is more complex but still accessible, is not tied to a national agenda, and offers a pathway to peace rather than war.

Building-block 1: Geopolitics and the projection of power. Geopolitics is about the projection of power, and the flip side is that geopolitics is also about challenging projections of power. Geopolitics is the sum of the dynamics of some countries trying to project their influence beyond their borders and across the globe to serve their "interests" and the reactions of countries trying to prevent this power projection. Some of the countries trying to challenge power projection will also be quite powerful. They are in a competition to see who will project power and in what manner. Not all countries will be successful in their goals of power projection. Other challengers will be weaker countries who see themselves as being disadvantaged by the actions of the more powerful countries. Other weaker countries may

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work with a more powerful country to help it project power. They may see an advantage. Or they may have little choice.

Building-block 2: Geopolitics and stronger and weaker countries. It is just as important to think about weaker countries and their relations with stronger countries as it is to think about relations between stronger countries. Geopolitics is not simply about one-against-one battles between great powers, or even alliances of great powers. Instead, geopolitics is a set of relations between countries. Some of these relations will be with countries with a similar amount of power (strong with strong, weak with weak). Other relations will be between countries with different amounts of power (strong with weak, weak with strong). To understand the actions of one country means placing it within the web of global relations.

Building-block 3: Economic relations between weak and strong countries are the driving force of geopolitics. We live in an unequal world, a world of persistent disparities in wealth and power between countries. The relations between the stronger and weaker countries in the world is the main driving force of geopolitics. It is the engine that drives us towards periods of geopolitical change and the increased risk of war. The reason is that projection of military power is motivated by economic relations and competition. Economic relations and competition are the reason and the means of projecting military power and use of violence far beyond a country's own borders. As geopolitics is about economic relations and the projection of power it means that businesses and countries work together to change the world. Businesses and countries both "do" geopolitics. They are both players in the game, or actors on the stage. Classic geopolitics usually sees countries as the only actors on the global stage. In fact, geopolitics is about how businesses create a web of economic relations and use countries to build or protect those relations.

Building-block 4: Businesses are important geopolitical actors, not just countries. Businesses and countries act together to make the geopolitical world. Economic relations and the projection of military power span the globe. Geopolitics is the combination of the pattern of economic relations between stronger and weaker countries and the way this requires the projection of power by stronger countries. Economic relations are another way of talking about the trade and investment linkages between businesses in different countries. The projection of power by force and diplomacy is about establishing a military presence and political presence in countries to safeguard these economic relations that exist as a geography of trade and investment networks. Power projection can be thought of as the attempt by one country to establish a presence in the territory of another country. Economic strength helps pay for the projection of military power. And this is seen as a good investment as military power is expected to protect existing economic relations and help make new ones.

Building-block 5: The geography of geopolitics involves networks and territory. Geopolitics is a combination of networks of economic relations and the political control of territory. Put another way, economic interests of resource extraction, and other elements of global supply chains, are forms of territorial geopolitics. Seapower is the essential component of force projection and control of overseas economic interests. Seapower is expressed as both controlling networks of trade across oceans, and using that control to further interests onshore, territory in other words. Control of the seas, especially the facilitation of unhindered trade, is required when territorial control is far away from the home country. Patterns of oceanic trade, and the military strength to protect them, are a form of network geopolitics.

Building-block 6: The geopolitical world is always changing. Geopolitics is a process. The back and forth of economic competition and military force leads us to the expectation that the geopolitical world is ever-changing. Hence, geopolitics is best thought of as a process rather than a static picture. The world is always in flux. It is just that some moments of historical change are more dramatic and consequential than others. Contrary to the tendency of classic geopolitics to talk of geographies that are largely static, it is useful to think of how things change rather than how things are permanent. Of course, thinking of geopolitics as a process does not mean that distances across the Pacific Ocean will shrink and expand, or the Himalayan mountains will rise and fall. That would be absurd. Instead, the process of geopolitics is about how the importance of different geographic features changes over time. Geographic features are the landscape in which economic relations are made and power is projected. Whether geographic features are vectors or barriers changes with the changes in geographies of industrial production and trade, technology, and the ups and downs of relations between countries. Which country controls an area of ocean or

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a chokepoint changes, not the physical geography of the ocean or strait in question. But these physical features play a crucial role in the geographies of economic relations and power projection. The physical features also play a crucial role in how these geographies are challenged and change. Putting building-blocks 1 through 6 together allows for a definition of geopolitics.

Building-block 7: A definition of geopolitics. Geopolitics is the use of economic and political power to control networks, territory and physical features. In turn, geopolitics is the use of the control of networks, territory, and physical features to increase economic and political power. As you can see, there are two parts to the definition, but they are very much connected. The two parts highlight the idea of geopolitics as a process, building-block 6. Economic gain and power projection are used to control parts of the world such as countries, oceans, and islands, and the way they are connected. Being in control of these things will make you richer or stronger. Not controlling them can make you poorer and weaker.

Near and Far Waters: The Geopolitics of Seapower

The understanding of geopolitics presented above is largely dependent on seapower. The oceans are vectors of trade through sea lines of communications (SLOCs), that are defined through UNCLOS as the “High Seas” with the right of the freedom of navigation. Also, the oceans are vectors of power projection that allow countries to land and station forces or threaten to do so.

Two physical geography features are near waters and far waters. Introducing these physical geography features requires us to see geography as something that changes with changing politics, rather than something permanent. And it requires us to think about the way the actions of other countries, including those that do not seem directly relevant, are necessary to understanding how a country develops its security strategy. Defining a piece of the ocean as either a near or a far water is, of course, relative. Such relativity is with regard to a particular country. For example, the Caribbean Sea is near to the US, and the Mediterranean Sea is far away. This is a simple, and unchanging, geographic fact. However, the geopolitical significance of these waters is dynamic because near and far waters are physical geographic arenas of the shifting pattern of global geopolitical relations.

Simply, a country (Country A) gains the power to present in/encroach upon another country's near waters (Country B). See Figure 1. Over time a country can effect control over its near waters by being able to prevent encroachment by another country or drive out any country that has encroached. Subsequently, that country may build up its seapower and encroach on the near waters of another country. The starting point is a moment when Country's A and B have control of their respective near waters. Over time, Country A retains control of its near waters and encroaches on the near waters of Country B. Country B is not able to encroach upon Country A's near waters. Hence, Country B's near waters become Country A's far waters, but the relationship is not reciprocated.

This simple pattern introduces the role of near and far waters in geopolitics through two separate but related dynamics:-

- a. The current global power's presence in far waters becomes contested by a rising primary country who identifies them as their near waters. Schematically, Country A's encroachment in the near waters of Country B is contested by Country B. Country A can no longer be sure it can retain its presence in its far waters that are Country B's near waters, and
- b. The current global power's near waters becoming a rising primary country's far waters. A country that has become accustomed to having control of its near waters while assuming a secure presence in far waters (encroachment in the near waters of other countries) finds that another country is encroaching in its near waters.

The two statements clarify the contemporary geopolitics of China's growing power. Especially, it helps us think about the importance of the South China Sea as a geopolitical arena, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a form of global power projection. Geopolitical tensions in the western Pacific and South China Sea are a conflict over China's near waters and US far waters. In turn, the ability of China through the geopolitical projects of the BRI to project

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power across the globe is evidence of its increasing ability to act within far waters that are the near waters of other countries.

Geopolitics as a Path towards Peacebuilding

We need to see geopolitics as a web of economic and political relations between and amongst stronger/richer and weaker/poorer countries. Seeing the world in this way provides avenues for political decision-making that are different from the narrow us-versus-them attitudes of national geopolitics; a form of thinking that has in the past led to nothing but zero-sum thinking to be resolved by military force. My definition of geopolitics is one that sees the world as a connected whole in which “our” actions have similar affects and goals as “theirs”, and in which weaker and poorer countries are as important as “world powers.” The “all in it together” approach is an avenue to peacebuilding, in contrast to “us versus them” realism.

The process of peacebuilding is very different from the practices of classic geopolitics. Peacebuilding requires seeing conflict as the product of complexity in the form of many actors (countries and businesses, mainly) each with a multitude of interests. Even one country has multiple needs, goals, and issues that it must wrestle with at a particular time. Classic geopolitics, on the other hand, wants to simplify the world. It leads to an us-and-them mentality that believes the “them” are unscrupulous and unreasonably vindictive. Classic geopolitics is a mapping of the world based on a set of simple good and evil binaries. The tedious parade of superhero movies is the cultural crutch for this world view. Recognizing the position, needs, and arguments of others is seen as hopelessly naïve. Behaving this way means you’ll get eaten in the jungle. But that is the pathway to war.

Peacebuilding offers an alternative path. It’s not naïve. In fact, the process of successful peacebuilding is to recognize how hard any problem is to solve. It does not simply ask us to sit in a circle and sing kumbaya. It is not the coward’s path. The exact opposite is true. It is the braver path. Why? Because it requires swimming against the tide of policy-, academic-, and cultural-preferences that speak of war. By which I mean, can you see a peacebuilding blockbuster movie knocking *Top Gun*, or a superheroes resort to violence in the name of good, off the box-office records list? Cheerleading for militarism is the easier path; the path that is usually demanded of us.

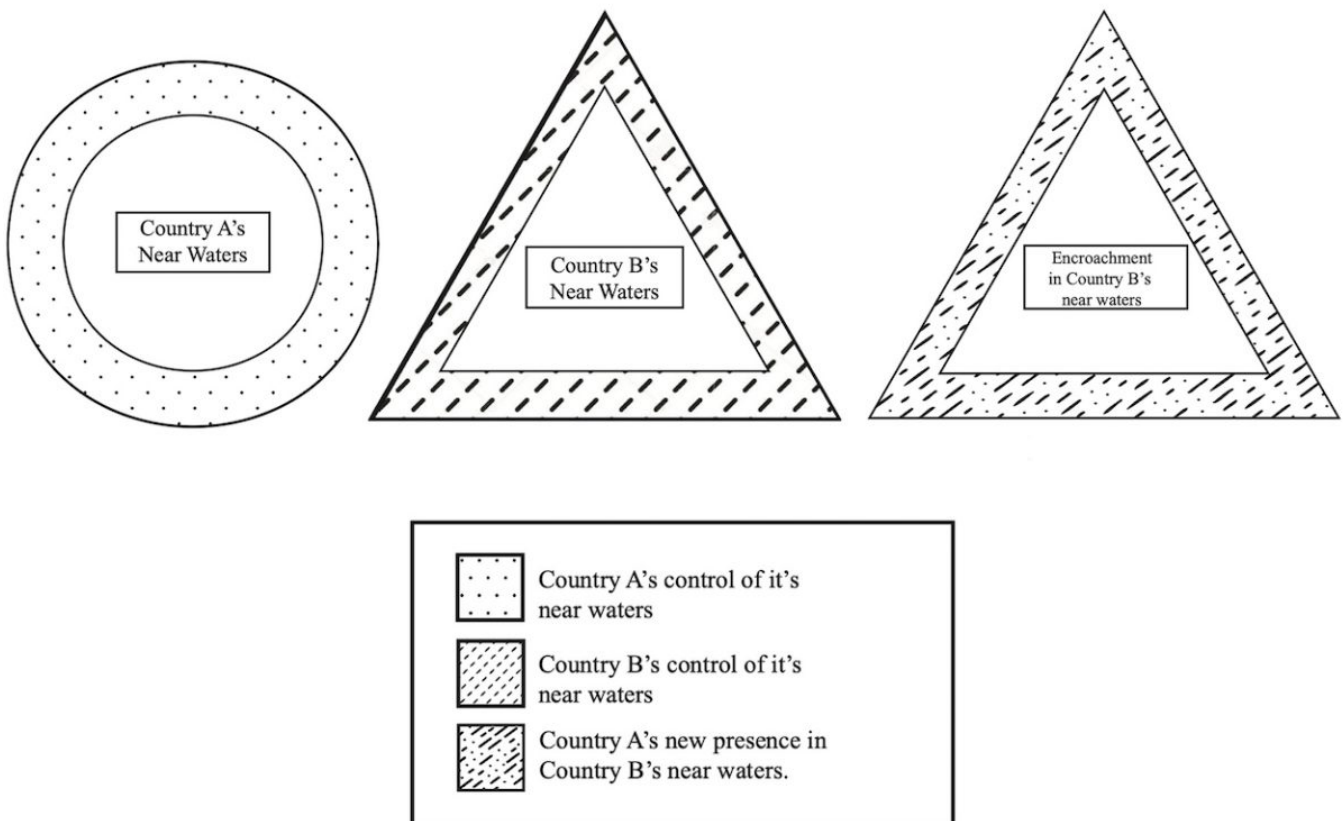
Peacebuilding is a brave for another reason too. It requires the peacebuilder to be vulnerable by considering their own attitudes and actions, and how they are contributing to the problem. In other words, it requires people in the US and allied countries to figure out how their actions are provoking reactions. And it requires us to consider how we use violence to prevent those reactions. It also requires us to challenges dominant narratives of why the current unequal world is either “natural” or something that just needs a little tinkering while the power relations remain largely the same. In peacebuilding language, it requires those of us in primary countries to “turn first.” Specifically, it requires a consideration of how the geopolitics of near and far waters has been constructed for the benefit of a minority of the world’s population. Hence, we understand China’s development of seapower as simply trying to attain the advantage held by the US post-World War Two or Britain in the nineteenth century. Classic geopolitics provides a simple vision: use military power to maintain this status quo. This is reasonable only within the tenets of realism. In the past it has simply led to war. If we’d like to avoid that fate we need to reconsider geopolitics and see it as a systemic set of relations that enables war and explains the role of others rather than vilifying them. Though no definition is a panacea to the world’s problems, a fuller definition of geopolitics is necessary if we are not to face déjà vu all over again.

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Figure 1

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About the author:

Colin Flint, a geographer by training, is Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science at Utah State University. His research interests include geopolitics and peacebuilding. He is the author of *Near and Far Waters: The Geopolitics of Seapower* (Stanford University Press, 2024), *Introduction to Geopolitics* (Routledge, 4th ed. 2022), *Geopolitical Constructs: The Mulberry Harbours, World War Two, and the Making of a Militarized Transatlantic* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), and co-author, with Peter Taylor of *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality* (Routledge, 7th edition, 2018). He is editor emeritus of the journal *Geopolitics*. His books have been translated into Spanish, Polish, Korean, Mandarin, Japanese and Farsi.